

# Jennie Taylor BECCA



This is dedicated to Maggie,  
who has always supported and  
encouraged me. Without her I  
would never have had the nerve  
to finish and publish this book.  
I love you, my Maggie!



Becca

Cover art by Ilya Vasilevskiy

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**Tuesday, April 5th**

“Have fun.” I told Natasha. She was heading out the door for her date.

She’s picking up Mike Haynes and they’re going to a movie.

“I will. You sure you don’t want to come along, Becca?”

“I’m sure. Thanks, though.”

“Later.”

She left the room that we share and I laid in my bed. Natasha came to stay with us just after the school year started. Mr. Johnson, Tasha’s dad, was sent to Germany to assist in the war. He’s a biologist, and they’re working on ways to counter biological warfare. There has been some intelligence that some pretty nasty stuff could be used against our troops if things don’t improve in Ukraine and Saudi Arabia. Tasha’s mom went along with him, but they didn’t want Tasha that close to the action. She was just sixteen at the time, so she’s staying with us. I’m glad they let her stay. We’ve been best friends since preschool, I don’t think I could live without her.

I went down to the kitchen and sat and watched Mom chop vegetables. Chop. Chop. Chop. I don't know how she does that so fast without cutting herself. I'd take a finger off.

"Any homework tonight, Becca?" she asked.

"I finished it in last hour."

"If you're bored you could go help your father trim the bushes." she said, smiling. Mom is really pretty when she smiles. Sometimes people say I look like her. I don't see it, I mean my hair is almost brown and hers is a glowing blonde, but I hope I do.

"Mom, can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure, honey." she said slowly. She stopped chopping and looked up at me. "You okay?"

"Yeah, it's nothing. Ya know what, never mind." I got up.

"Becca, what is it?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

"Sit down."

Yes, Rebecca, open your big mouth. Now what? I don't want to lie to her. I mean I'm not even good at lying, anyway. Think of something to say, Becca. Quick.

"What's up?" she asked.

"I... changed my mind."

"Honey, you're upset. What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I said. A tear escaped, I could feel it trailing down my cheek. "You ever feel like there's something you can't tell someone because they might not handle it well? And like, you can't take it back after you say it, ya know?"

“Everybody feels that way sometimes.” she said. She sat down across from me. “Whatever it is, why don’t you tell me and I can help you figure out how to tell this person what it is you want to say.”

“What if... I mean... I don’t know if I can.”

“Honey, you know your dad and I are going to love you no matter what, right? If there’s something you’re worried about then maybe I can help.”

“What if... you get mad?” I asked. Okay, I can’t seem to look anywhere except down at my hands right now.

“I’ll try not to. Whatever it is you think I’ll be mad about, I’ll still love you. And if you’ve done something, isn’t it better to get it out in the open now?” She sounds worried.

“I...” I shrugged. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Good.”

I can’t tell her this. She’ll be angry. Dad will be angry. And they probably won’t even let me hang out with Bridget, my little sister, any longer. I might be contagious or something. But I can’t keep this a secret anymore. It’s killing me trying. Almost literally when I was really depressed a few months ago.

“Honey, just tell me. I’m sure it’s not as bad as you think.”

“I’m not wh-who you think I am.” I mumbled.

“Oh really. So you’re what, some space alien clone sent to take the place of my daughter while she’s off saving the universe?”

“No. I just mean... see... see, um...” I risked glancing up. She’s smiling, like she’s enjoying my torture here. I looked back at my hands. “I know you’re going to be disappointed, though.”

“Just tell me what the problem is, Rebecca. Whatever it is, we’ll deal with it together, okay?”

“Promise not to tell anyone else?”

“I’m not going to tell anyone.”

“Even Dad?”

“If it’s something he doesn’t need to know, I won’t say anything.”

“It’s just... um, I kind of... am... I’m... Mom, I’m...” I sighed and took a deep breath. Just blurt it out, Becca. “I’m a lesbian.”

She was quiet. I expected her to protest or tell me I was just imagining it, or it was a phase. Or maybe that I was confused and just thought that I was gay because I hadn’t found any boys I liked yet, and I’d find the right one soon. Instead she was just quiet.

I glanced up and she was just sitting there, waiting for me to continue. I couldn’t keep looking at her, though. I’m not sure what her reaction is. She’s just sitting there.

“Mom?”

“Yes honey.”

“You’re not going to tell me I’m not, that I’m wrong, or try to talk me out of this?”

“You’re seventeen. I figure you know how you feel by this point.”

“Oh.” What does that mean, exactly? “Are you mad?”

“There’s nothing for me to be mad about.”

“Are you... um, disappointed?”

“Not disappointed. Maybe a little sad. I know you’re going to have obstacles you wouldn’t have had otherwise. But you have to live your own life, Rebecca. So if this is what makes you happy, then I’m glad for you to find that out now, while you’re still young.”

“Thanks.” She’s way too understanding. I don’t get it.



I finally made myself really sit back and look up at her. She doesn't look mad. She doesn't look like she's holding it in or hiding it, either. She looks relieved.

She handed me a tissue, then stood and came around the table. She pulled me to my feet and hugged me, then she thanked me for telling her.

"Th-there's something else." I said. I rubbed the tears off my face. "Something that I... kinda need your advice on." We sat again.

"I'll help if I can." she said. She smiled. She really isn't mad?

"How... um... what if... no, that's not..." How do I even ask this? What exactly am I trying to ask, even? "Can you make yourself stop loving someone?" Can I just die from embarrassment now?

"Ooh, wow. That's a tough one. I don't think you can, Rebecca. I really don't think so."

"Oh." Well that's just great. "H-how do you deal with it if you... do love someone and... and you know they don't feel the same way?"

"The best thing would be to stay away from him. Or I guess it's a her, huh?"

"Um," I nodded.

"Just stay away. Separation may help you, honey. At least stay away as much as you can. I suppose you might have class with this girl?"

"I can't stay away." I said. I began to cry. Well, cry *harder*. "We've been best friends forever."

"You... oh!" She leaned back and ran her hands through her hair. She does that when she's upset sometimes. "Okay. Well. I didn't see this coming when I woke up this morning, I can tell you that."

"I'm sorry."

“No, that’s okay. Have you told Natasha how you feel?”

“Not even! She has no clue that I’m gay even, she’d probably freak if I told her I was in love with her.” Do you know how embarrassing it is to tell your mother something like that?

“She’s your best friend. She might be surprised, but she wouldn’t be angry at you, Becca.”

“I can’t tell her.”

“Then you have a problem, don’t you? Because you can’t exactly stay away from her.”

“I know that!” I snapped at her. “This is why I asked... how do I stop?”

“Honey, I wish I could help you. Maybe you should try dating someone. Maybe you’d find someone else that you like as much.”

“Right, ‘cause I’m randomly going to ask some girl out?”

“I don’t know, honey. I’ve never been in that position. Isn’t there some club or group or something where you’d at least know if there are more like you? At least you’d know where to start that way. This is way past me, honey.”

“Okay. Well, I guess I’ll just... figure it out.” That was a waste of time.

“I wish there was more I could do, Rebecca.”

“This went better than I expected, anyway. I figured you’d be mad, or scream at me or something.”

“I love you. Just the way you are, okay?”

“Love you too, Mom. I’m going to go lay down for a while, if you don’t need help chopping.”

“I’ve got this.”

I went back to my room and laid in bed. Mom wasn’t a lot of help. On the other hand, at least she didn’t freak out and kick me out of the house. I guess that happens to gay teens sometimes.

It feels weird that I've actually told someone. Especially one of my parents. Weird in a good way, though. Like... like there's less pressure on me, in some ways. Like there's at least one person I don't have to hide from.

I spent the whole evening thinking about my dilemma. The best thing is just to wait and hope I fall out of love, I suppose. Except it kind of hurts.

Telling Mom I'm a lesbian and her not overreacting really felt good. Maybe it's time to be open about it. Maybe if I am then some other lesbian around will ask me out and start me down that path to loving someone else. If I'm open and out then others will know. There has to be more lesbians in our school, right?

Except none of them will have Tasha's cute little way of laughing. None will have her pretty blonde hair. None will have that spot on her back that is so ticklish. None of them will know what makes me cry, or makes me laugh, or how I'm terrified to be alone, even for ten minutes when everyone goes to the store. They won't have the shared experiences like I have with Tasha, where something can happen and we can just glance at each other and smile because we both are reminded of the exact same thing.

"Are you awake, Tasha?" I asked. Her bed is across the room from mine, and I said it softly in case she had already gone to sleep. I didn't want to wake her.

"Barely." she replied.

"If I tell you something, will you promise to keep it a secret?"

"Did you steal that twenty dollars from Miss Freeman?"

Miss Freeman is our Spanish teacher. Last week she had twenty

dollars disappear from her purse, which was locked in her desk all day. She swears one of the students figured out how to get into the drawer and took her twenty dollars.

“You know if I had I would have gotten a whole bunch of M&Ms and shared them with you.” I joked.

“So what’s your secret?” she asked. I could hear her rolling on her side, facing me, even if I couldn’t really see her too well in the dark.

“Well, um...” Actually, it being dark sort of helps, I think. “I’m a lesbian.”

“Oh. That’s nice.”

“That’s nice? That’s all you have to say?”

“Well what do you want, Becca? You want me to be your wing girl?”

“Wait, you’re not like shocked or anything?”

“Well,” She paused for a few seconds, like she was trying to figure what to say without insulting me. “Not really, Becca.”

“So you already knew?”

“No. I’m just not surprised.”

“Oh. So you’re not freaked out by it or anything?”

“Why would I be? Look, I’m tired, I’m going to sleep. We can talk in the morning about how to scope out girls for you, okay?”

“Um, okay.”

I’ve told two people, scared to death how they’d react, and their reaction has completely been nothing. Like it’s not important at all. What the heck?

“I think Kendra Logan might be bi.” Tasha said.

“Kendra’s a total skank. What makes you think I’d remotely be interested in her?”

“Aw come on, she’s not that bad. Just because people say she does all that stuff doesn’t mean she really does. And she’s not bad looking.”

“Her hair is always a total mess.”

“See, this is where you come in.” she said. I could *hear* her smiling. “You clean her up, make her look all classy and cute. Girl has potential, I’m telling you.”

“And you think *I’m* the one to bring that out in her?” I asked, laughing.

“I have faith in you. Now go to sleep, Becca.”

“Goodnight.”

**Wednesday, April 6th**

It was weird, sitting there at breakfast and not talking about what I told Mom and Tasha

yesterday. They don't even know that each other know. I can tell Tasha wants to talk, but she's not because she doesn't think I want my parents to know. I mean Dad doesn't know yet, unless Mom told him, so I guess it's best. Except he just left, and she's still not talking.

"Hurry up, Bridge." Tasha shouted up the stairs. We give Bridget a ride to school most days. She goes to the middle school, and it's on the way to the high school.

"Mom," I said. I waited for her to stop cleaning her cereal bowl and turn toward me. "Is it okay if I tell Bridget, or do you want me to wait on that?"

"Tell her what, Becca?" she asked. "Oh." She glanced over at Tasha.

"I told her about it last night." I said. I hoped she wouldn't think I meant I told Tasha everything. If she said anything about me being in love with her I think I'd die.

"Its up to you, Rebecca."

"I just didn't want to say anything. I mean in case you thought she was still too impressionable or something."

"Well honey, judging from the googly eyes she keeps making at the boy down the street, I think her sexual orientation is pretty well set at this point. I seriously doubt you'll influence her in that arena."

"Okay. Good."

The thing is, Bridget sort of looks up to me. She's thirteen, and I'm her big sister, so I guess that makes sense. She'll actually probably get a kick out of it if I tell her. Like it's special that I trust her enough to tell her. I mean I guess I do, though. She's a good kid, she won't

make this harder than it has to be.

“Mrs. Lang, your youngest has a serious problem getting ready in time in the morning.” Tasha said to Mom. “Is it okay if I go drag her outside, even if she’s half naked? We’re going to be late.”

“By all means.” Mom told her. And then, when Natasha was gone, she sat by me. “You told her?”

“Not everything. Just that I’m gay.”

“What was her reaction?”

“She was cool about it. She already started talking about trying to set me up with other girls.”

“You should take her up on that. If she can help, that’s great.”

“Yeah. So... um, what would it be like if... like if I brought a date home?”

“I just want you to be happy, honey.”

“What about Dad?”

“I think your father would handle it.”

“You didn’t tell him, did you?”

“I promised you I wouldn’t if it wasn’t something he needed to know.”

“Oh.” Good. I’m glad I can trust her. “Do you... um, think you can?”

“If you’d like.”

“Do you really think he’ll take it okay?”

“Your father loves you, Rebecca. I’m sure he’ll want you to be happy.”

“Okay.”

“Hey, try to keep Tasha away from the television today.” she

warned.

“What’s going on?”

“They keep talking about bombs in Europe. I’m sure her parents are fine, but there’s no point scaring her until they’ve figured out where was bombed and what they were hit with.”

“Yeah. When is this going to end, Mom?”

“I wish I knew, honey. All we can do right now is pray for it to be over soon.”

“I guess.”

“Don’t worry about it right now. Things will work out. Soon, I’m sure.”

“I hope. I better go see if I can speed those two up.”

“Try to have a good day, honey.”

Bridget didn’t even have her shoes on yet. She is so incredible slow. I grabbed her shoes and hauled them to the car, figuring she’d follow. She can put them on in the car.

“Hey Bridge,” I said. We were several blocks from home. I looked back and she was still struggling with her shoes. “I want to tell you something that I’ve only trusted two other people with. It’s something important to me.”

“Did you steal the twenty dollars?”

“Why does everyone think I’m a thief!” I shouted. This is really offensive. “I’m not a thief!”

“Chill, I was just kidding.”

“We’ve already covered that.” Tasha said, laughing.

“I’m gay, Bridget.”

“What?” she sat up quickly. “Oh my Gosh! Are you serious?”



“Completely.”

“That’s so cool! My sister is gay. Cool!”

“What is wrong with you people?” I asked, laughing. “I haven’t gotten the expected reaction out of *anyone*. I hear all these stories, I read about people telling their family, and there’s so many horror stories.”

“Well Becca, in your family did you really expect that? You have a really understanding family. They all love you, of course they’re going to accept it if it makes you happy.”

“Well... I mean it’s not about me being happy, it’s about me being honest. With myself.”

“This is so cool!” Bridget repeated. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“There’s this girl in one of my classes, and...”

“I’m not dating a child.”

“Ugh! She’s a year older than me, and I’m not a child.”

“Sorry squirt, you really are.” Tasha told her.

“A year older than you would still make her three years younger than I am.” I said. “That’s gross.”

“Oh, but it would be okay if there was some twenty year old that wanted to date you?”

“It’s not the same. I’m not a child.”

“Well you’re not exactly an adult, either.” Tasha said. “And yeah, it’d kinda be gross, Becca.”

“Okay, well, this is all academic at this point. I’m not... *out*, ya know? So you can’t tell anyone, Bridget. Promise me.”

“Aw, it’s not like any of my friends would tell people.”

“Not yet. Please. Don’t make me regret trusting you.”

“Okay, okay.”

The world didn't change. I came out to my family and best friend and everything is the same. At least so far. Mostly. Nobody at school is staring at me or making remarks about it. Of course nobody else knows.

"Becca," Natasha said, nudging me with her elbow. "How about Jenny Lewis?"

"What?"

"She might be. When was the last time you saw her even look at a guy?"

"Stop. I don't want to do this."

"Oh come on, Becca. I'm just trying to help. Hey, I'd love it if you found someone special, someone who makes *you* feel special. You deserve it."

"Well not today. Please don't embarrass me."

"I was just making a suggestion."

"I gotta get to class. See you later."

I do deserve someone who makes me feel special. Don't I? Maybe I don't. Maybe I'm so messed up that I just fall in love with the one person I can't ever have, with the sole purpose of punishing myself. For what, though? I don't know. Maybe for not being honest about how I felt since the third grade, when I first figured out that I had a crush on Natasha.

I was thinking about Tasha's mom and dad being stuck in a war zone, and how terrified she must be. I was in third hour, and Mr. Walters was droning on and on about something, and I was ignoring him. And then there was an announcement over the PA that classes were being canceled for the rest of the week, that all students were to go home immediately.

“What’s going on?” April shouted. She was crying already.  
“Mr. Walters?”

“Just follow the instructions, April.”

He went to the corner of the room and turned on the television. There were scrolling bars across the bottom saying we were under attack. The screen showed a thick fog, and people running and screaming from it. Before the camera panned away, a man stumbled from a building that had been enveloped by the fog, and his skin was sagging, almost like it was dripping off his face.

Then the fire alarm went off. Everyone rushed from the classrooms. I hurried down the hallway and found Tasha near our lockers. She was shaking and had her hands up to her face.

“Tasha!”

“Becca!” She thrust her arms around me. “What’s happening? Becca, what is going on?”

“We need to get home.”

“Mom and Dad...”

“I’m sure they’re fine. They’re over there, not here in harm’s way like we are.”

“I have to call them.”

“You really think you’ll be able to get through? Probably so many people calling right now that there’s no way. We have to go, Tash.”

“Okay. I... I’m kinda scared.”

“I know, honey, but it’s going to be okay.”

Right. Lie to her, Rebecca. Those people were dying. That was in Florida, I think. And we're being sent home all the way here in Kansas. Whatever is going on, the government obviously thinks it might reach us. Sure, things are going to be okay. Except for the people dying. Except for people with their faces melting off.

It was crazy outside. Cars were going everywhere, the parking lot was jammed up with cars banging into each other. Natasha was crying so hard I thought I'd have to take over and drive, even though I just have a learner's permit. But she held it together enough, and we found a low curb to drive over. We crossed the school yard, dodging running students, to emerge onto the side street.

It was almost as crazy at the middle school. I didn't know how we were going to find Bridget. But there she was, running with some other kids down the sidewalk toward home.

"Bridget!" I shouted out the window as we passed. Tasha swerved to the curb.

"Becca, what's going on?" she shouted back. Before I could even get out of the car she was grabbing me in a hug. "What's going on?"

"I don't know, Bridge. We need to get home."

"Are we being bombed?"

"I don't know, we just need to get home."

"Can we drop Amber and David on the way?"

"Sure, I guess. Just get in."

We sped down the road, dodging kids who ignored crosswalks and didn't care about traffic. We pulled in front of Bridget's friends' house. I wasn't just going to drop these kids off. They're like Bridget's age, and they're scared. I walked with them up to the door and we went inside. There was nobody there.

“When will your parents be home?” I asked the girl, Amber.

“Mom doesn’t work.” she said. She had tears running down her face. “I don’t know where she’s at. Dad drives a truck, he’s in Nebraska somewhere this week.”

“Well I can’t leave you here.” I said. “Write a note to your mom telling her you’ll be at our house. Hurry up.”

“We shouldn’t leave.” David said. “Mom wouldn’t want us going somewhere without permission.”

“You’re not staying here.” I told him.

“But...”

“Shut up, David!” Amber snapped at him. “Get me some paper.”

“Bridget, go tell Tasha we’ll be a couple of minutes.”

David got paper and Amber started writing her note. He turned the television on and flipped through channels. They were all showing the same exact broadcast.

“It says people are getting sick in Illinois.” he said.

“What do you mean sick?” I asked.

“Look.” He pointed at the screen. “People are stumbling around, acting like they don’t know anyone.”

“Come on, we need to go. You done with that note, Amber?”

“Yeah. We should leave it on the table in the...”

“Well hurry. We’ll be in the car. Come on David.”

We hurried home, where Mom was waiting. She was crying

and staring at the news. She hugged me and Bridget, and even Tasha. She kind of stared at the other two for a minute.

“What is this?” I asked her.

“They attacked us. Some kind of fog, some chemicals. A lot of people... they’re dying. Everywhere. We’re launching nukes at North Korea, and against the camps we know of in Ukraine, but we can’t do much there or in Saudi Arabia because our allies are too close.”

“Are we safe here?” Bridget asked.

“I don’t know, honey. Whatever was in those bombs is causing people to get sick. They say the sick ones lose their mind, start attacking and biting everyone.”

“Well the army is going to stop them, right?” Amber asked her.

“I don’t think there’s much they can do. The President says stay in your houses and keep the doors locked for a few days. They hope it will die down by then and they can get control.”

Amber kept trying to call her mother, but the lines were all busy. The rest of us huddled around the television, watching the same news repeat over and over again. Every now and then a new story would come on about illness somewhere, usually closer than last time, or a new analyst would come on telling us what to do.

The power went out. And then the storm sirens started wailing. I didn’t even know they could with the power out, but they were blaring away. Whatever was happening, it was happening here now. Everyone was crying and panicking at that point. Even Mom. Everyone was looking to her for what to do, and she was in full on panic mode.

“Everyone just calm down.” I said. I rubbed my own tears away and tried to force myself to be calm. “Tasha, Bridget, check to make sure all the windows and doors are locked. Mom, get everyone

some water and something to eat, okay? Mom, you hear me?"

"Yeah." she mumbled.

"You two go help her with the food." I told Amber and David.

"What about you?" Tasha asked.

"I'll explain later. Just don't lock me out, okay?"

"You're not going out there?" Mom asked. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Yes. I'll be fine. Everybody get moving."

I went out into the garage, over to the gun cabinet. Dad has it locked with a padlock on the front. The thing is I know where he hides the key. I felt around under the counter top, and there it was, stuck in one of those little magnetic things. I opened up the cabinet and grabbed guns and put them in a cardboard box. And then I shoved a bunch of boxes of bullets in with them. Lastly, I grabbed a shotgun. It was heavy, but I carried it toward the house.

"Tasha." I shouted, once back inside.

"Yeah, coming." she yelled back. She hurried in where I was, Bridget tagging along behind her.

"Keep an eye on these things. Don't let anybody mess with them until I get back."

"What are these for?"

"I thought you hated guns." Bridget said.

"I do. But people are going insane. We have to protect ourselves. Nobody touches these, okay?" I glanced around to make sure we wouldn't be overheard. "Especially Mom. She's not well right now."

"Got it." Tasha said.

"I'll be back in a few minutes."

“Where are you going?” Bridget asked. She sounds panicked again already.

“Just checking on Mr. And Mrs. Goldman.”

“Be careful.”

I hurried across the lawn, toward the neighbor’s house. I banged on their door for a couple of minutes, but they wouldn’t answer. I know they have to be home.

“Mr. Goldman. Mrs. Goldman. It’s Rebecca Lang from next door.” I banged some more. “I just wondered if you could come over and stay with us.”

I kept banging and shouting for maybe five minutes. They wouldn’t answer. These poor old people can’t stay locked up alone for several days. I don’t know how they make it one day without someone helping them. They’re old and fragile. But I can’t make them come with me.

“They won’t answer the door.” I said when I walked in back at home.

Everyone was in the living room, looking at me with that panicked look again. The guns were still in the exact same place as I left them. I took one of the hand guns and carried it over next to the where the others were seated. I sat down and tried to figure the thing out. I loathe these things, but I suppose now is a good time to get over that.

“What do we do now?” Mom asked.

“I don’t know. We wait.”



The front door rattled and everyone turned. Mom let out a little squeal, Bridget squeezed over next to me. Dad came in. Bridget jumped up and ran over to him.

“Daddy!” she shouted, jumping against him and hugging him.

“It’s okay.” he told her. He pulled himself away from her and turned to close and lock the door. “Who are these two?” Dad asked.

“Amber and David.” Bridget told him. She’s crying. “Their parents aren’t home. What’s going on, what is wrong with people?”

“It’s going to be okay.” he told her.

He nudged the box of guns with his shoe and then looked up at the rest of us. He scanned over us, and his eyes stopped on me. He glanced down at the gun in my hand. His eyes went to Mom, who is shaking and crying, then back at me. He gave a little nod.

“How is everyone doing?” he asked. He asked me, actually, because Mom was basically incoherent.

“Scared to death.” I told him.

“How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay.” I said. Tears began to flow. “Scared, but I’m okay.”

“Good. Here in a while I’ll give you a quick lesson on how to use that.” he said, nodding toward the gun.

“Mr. Lang, do you think my Mom and Dad are okay?” Tasha asked.

“I wish I knew, Natasha. I certainly hope so.” He grabbed the shotgun and started loading shells into it. “This was a good idea. Was this you, Rebecca?”

“Becca’s been so calm through all this.” Mom said. Finally she

talks. "She's known exactly what to do, she's been so helpful."

"Well we're going to have to get prepared quick, so I'm glad I can count on you, Rebecca."

"Prepared for what?" Amber asked him.

"We can't stay here." he said.

"But the President said..."

"The President is wrong."

"We have to go home." David said.

"We'll talk about that in a while." He walked over and reached down and Mom stuck her hand in his. She held it to her face and cried. "Bridget and Natasha, go up and start packing. Just a couple of changes of clothes."

"Right." Bridget said. Tasha nodded. They both stood and went upstairs.

"Honey, why don't you take our guests into the kitchen and see if they can help you pack enough food for a few days. I'm going to show Rebecca how to use that gun."

Mom reluctantly went into the kitchen with Amber and David. Dad sat on the sofa. He lowered his head and rubbed at his face. He's really stressed. I guess that was stupid, we're all stressed.

"You sort of took charge, I guess?" he asked.

"Someone had to." I mumbled. "Mom wasn't up to it."

"Yes, I guessed as much. I'm sorry it took me so long to get here. Traffic is crazy out there."

"I know. Dad, what are we going to do?"

"We're going to the cabin up in the mountains. Remember Uncle Bill's cabin? We visited there about three years ago."

“I remember.”

“It’s not safe here. The people that get infected go crazy, and they seem almost... blood thirsty. I’m sorry if this scares you, Becca, but this is just something you have to deal with. They become almost like cannibals. I saw it on the way here.”

“Here in town?”

“Yes. I’m going to show you how to use that gun. And after that, if someone so much as looks threatening you have to shoot them.”

“Uh!”

“I know it’s bad, but you have to, Rebecca. Because if they get close, you might catch whatever it is too. It’s going to be hard, but you have to do it. No matter what. No matter if it’s someone you know, if it’s someone who looks okay, if it’s a child. You have to. Do you think you can?”

“I don’t... know.”

“I’m relying on you. You have to take care of your sister and Natasha.”

“What? But Dad...”

“Your Mom and I are going to be heading to get your grandparents and Bill and Shawna. You three are heading straight there.”

“What? No, Dad, we...”

“You need to go. We’ll be right there in a few days.”

“But...”

“You’re the only one I can trust with this.”

“But can’t we just come with you?”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“Then you shouldn’t go!”

“I have to. This isn’t up for discussion. I trust you to take care

of them until we can get there.”

He showed me how to use the gun. We fired it several times without any bullets in it, then he took me out to the back yard and had me fire it for real.

“I know it’s loud, you just have to deal with that.”

“Hopefully we won’t need it.” I said.

“Hopefully. Look, if anyone threatens you in any way just shoot them.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“It’s you or them.”

“But I can’t kill anyone. It’s... illegal.”

“Laws don’t count anymore.” he said. “Rebecca.” he grabbed me by the shoulders. “If you have to break in some place and steal to survive, do it. If you have to shoot someone, do it. Whatever it takes for you and your sister to survive.”

“But... but...”

“Reality is harsh.” he said. “Most of the people you know are going to die.”

“Dad,”

“You’re going to take Natasha and Bridget and go to the mountains. That cabin is far enough from everyone, you might be okay there. We’ll try to be there as soon as we can.”

“Okay.” Everyone I know is going to die?

“Take back roads. The main roads aren’t safe.”

“I understand.”

“Rebecca,” He hugged me. “If your mother and I aren’t there within a week from when you get there, you have to assume we won’t

be coming at all.”

“What? Dad, no.”

“If that happens, you’re in charge. You’re responsible for making sure everyone has food and is kept out of the weather and doesn’t ever go near any place that may be dangerous.”

“Daddy,”

“I know you’re scared. You’re the only one who can do this.”

I was crying when I went upstairs to pack my stuff. Dad called Tasha and Bridget down. I guess he’s explaining this to them, maybe. The gun had the safety on, but it still was scary carrying it. But it might be necessary.

Everyone was staring at me when I came down the stairs. Mom was hysterical, barely able to even stand up with Dad’s help. She lunged at me, wrapping her arms around me.

“You be careful, honey.” she said. “I love you so much.” She lowered her mouth next to my ear. “Tell her how you feel. Before it’s too late.”

“You girls need to get going.” Dad told me. “The sooner the better.”

“What about us?” David asked.

“We can drop you by on the way out of town.” I said. He nodded. “Dad, are you sure about this?”

“Yes. I’ve explained everything to Natasha and Bridget. You’re all set now.”

“I love you.” I told him. I slid from Mom and hugged him. And it just hit me, I may never see him again. “There’s something I want to tell you, in case I never see you again.”

“Don’t talk like that.” He patted my back.

“Just in case. It’s not important, not with all this going on, just something I really would feel better if you knew.”

“Okay.”

“It’s nothing, I just... I’m gay. I’ve wanted to tell you, but I was scared what you’d say.”

“It doesn’t matter, Rebecca.” he said. “I love you. Now you girls get moving. Your Mom and I are heading out here in just a few minutes. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“Okay. Bye Mom, I love you.”

“You two listen to Becca.” Mom told Bridget and Tasha.

There were people wandering around the neighborhood when we went out. I moved my bag with my clothes in it to my left hand so I could hold the gun in my right. It was scary. Dad came out with us, and he had the shotgun.

We put the cooler and our bags in the trunk of Tasha’s car and Tasha and I got in the front, everyone else piled in the back. Mom and Dad stood on the porch watching us as we pulled away. We were all crying, but Bridget was the worst with her racking sobs.

When we got to Amber and David’s house there was nobody there. I was standing at the front door, watching the street, the gun in my hand. The others went through the house, checking for any sign of where Amber and David’s mother might be.

“We have to get going.” I shouted. Everyone came into the living room. “We have to go, guys.”

“Their mother hasn’t been back.” Tasha said.

“Well we can’t wait around for her.”

“We can’t leave them alone.” Bridget whined. “What if she

never comes back?" she whispered.

"I don't know."

They look so scared. Worried about their mother. Worried about their father, too, I imagine. What can I do? I can't camp out at their house for days, hoping their mother comes home. And I can't go searching for her.

"They're coming with us." I said.

"We can't go." David complained.

"No, you have to go. Listen, kid, you're not staying here alone."

"I'm here." Amber argued.

"I'm not leaving you two here."

"We're not going."

"Listen, you can leave a note telling her where we're going. Does she have a cell phone?" Probably, everyone except me seems to. "We can keep calling her every chance we get. Maybe you'll get through some time. Or send her a text message or leave something on her voice mail. We can't stay here."

"But... Mom is never late getting home."

"Well I'm not leaving you here to die. We're going. Write a new note and let's go."

They didn't argue any more. I had Tasha write the note while Amber and David went to get some clothes. We were out of the house and down the street in less than five minutes.

"What is this?" Tasha said. She slowed. There are five or six people standing in the road. "What do I do?"

“Keep going.” I said.

“I’m not running over them.”

“So you stop and we die?”

“You’re being ridiculous.” she said.

“Fine. Just stop.”

She slowed and came to a stop, five feet from them. I opened the door and got out. Everyone was looking at me. The five guys in the street were starting around the front of the car, toward us.

“Stop right there.” I said, and I raised the gun. “Just get out of our way.”

“Come on little girl, you’re not going to shoot.” the guy closest to me said.

“I will.”

“No you won’t.” he said.

The guy on the driver’s side was getting pretty close to Tasha’s door. The guy on my side took another step closer. I aimed several feet above his head and pulled the trigger, wincing away as I did. He leaped back. The guy on the other side stopped.

“Next time I aim for you.” I said. I could hear the fear in my voice, but I hoped they couldn’t. “Please, just move. We just want to get out of here. We have no room for you, we have nothing you want. Just get out of the way.”

“Maybe we want your car.” he said. He looks nervous now too.

“There’s thousands of cars around. Find a different one. Go to a car lot and break in and take the keys for all the cars. Pick whichever one you want. Just leave us alone.”



“Maybe we want this one.” he said. He’s smiling now.

“Behind you!” Bridget shouted.

I spun around and aimed the gun at the guy approaching from the rear. The guy at the front stepped forward, though, and I had to turn the gun on him again.

“Stop!” I shouted. “If you keep coming, one of you is dying.”

“But which one.” the guy from behind asked.

“I don’t much care.” I replied.

He stepped forward. I swung around and fired. I hit his leg. I can’t believe that worked! I was aiming for his leg. I didn’t want to kill him. But then I spun to the front.

“Just go!” I shouted at them.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” the guy shouted. “We just wanted a ride! You’re going to leave us out here to die?”

“We have to go.” I said, crying. “Let us go.”

“Okay, okay.” He stepped away from the car. “I was just teasing about the car. I just wanted a ride to my house across town.”

“I’m sorry. Get off the streets. It’s dangerous.”

“With crazy bitches like you it is.”

I got back in the car and Tasha floored it. I started sobbing. I dropped the gun in the floor. I can’t believe I just did that. After all that talk Dad gave me, I figured I’d never actually have to use it.

“You killed him.” Amber said.

“I just hit his leg!”

“Well with all this going on you probably killed him. He can’t go to the hospital. And those people who are sick are going to find him. He can’t outrun them with a bad leg.”

“So I should let him drag you out of the car? Maybe leave *you* to be killed? Or who the hell knows what those guys had in mind, Amber. Maybe they like little girls. Maybe he had more in mind, maybe with no cops around to protect your little ass he would have decided he liked you and wanted you all for himself. You ever think of that?”

“Becca, back off.” Tasha told me.

“No! Dad was right, laws don’t apply anymore.” I picked the gun back up. “Whoever has this makes the rules now.”

It was pretty quiet for the next couple of hours. The only real talking was me when Tasha would ask where to turn or me reading the map out loud and telling her where we were going. And then it started getting dark.

“We can’t drive all the way there tonight.” Tasha said.

“And we’ll need gas.” Bridget added.

“I know. I guess we need to start thinking about a place to stay tonight.” I told them.

“There’s a town back...”

“No, Amber. No towns. It’s too dangerous. We need a farm in the middle of nowhere.”

“There could be people there.” she said. “They could have guns, too.” she said. “A lot of farmers do.”

“They might.” They probably do. I sighed and checked the safety on the gun for the fiftieth time. “As soon as we stop for the night I’ll need to show you how to use this, Tasha. We’re going to

have to keep guard, and I don't think I can stay up all night, so we'll have to take shifts."

"Becca." Bridget said softly. "Do you think that's a good idea? Shouldn't Natasha sleep so she can drive?"

"Well I can't do everything alone!"

"It's okay." Tasha said. "I can do it. It's fine."

"No, she's right. I guess I'll just stay up all night."

"I'll help, if I can." Bridget said. "If you can show me."

"Bridge..."

"I know how to use a gun." David interrupted. "Dad took me hunting a couple of times. I've used a rifle, but I think I can use the nine millimeter you have there without any problems."

"You'll blow your foot off, David." Amber told him.

"Come on, it's mostly going to be a lot of sitting there doing nothing anyway. I can do this."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Good."

Eventually they are all going to have to learn. When Mom and Dad get there he can show them. Or... or if they don't come within a week or so I may have to. Not that I'm an expert.

"Turn here. We'll see if there's a building of some kind we can spread out in for the night."

"What if someone comes?" Bridget asked. "And we need gas."

"If someone comes we'll take care of it, Bridge." I told her. "If we find a farm somewhere there will probably be a car or truck or something with some gas in it."

“Yeah, genius, but how do we get it from their car to ours?”

“I don’t know. We’ll figure it out.”

“You siphon it.” David said. “I’ve seen it done.”

“Do you know how?” Tasha asked him.

“I don’t know. Sure, I guess.”

“Up there.” I told Tasha. I was pointing, but I’m not sure how well she could see in the dark.

We pulled into the drive, up in front of the house. It was dark inside. So there has to be, what, five or six shots left in the gun? So as long as we don’t get overrun by a whole bunch of people wanting to steal the car or kidnap the kids we should be okay. I’ll have to reload later. And there’s a couple more guns in the trunk. I guess I should get one out for David, since he says he knows how to use it. I don’t know, he’s like twelve or thirteen or something.

“David, I want you to get out of the car.” I said.

“What? I’m not going out there.”

“You can’t make him!” Amber shouted.

“Will you relax. I want him to stand guard for you guys. He’s the only one who has ever used a gun. He can stand watch while I go check the house.”

“You really want to go in there?” Tasha asked.

“I don’t want to, but someone has to.”

“We should all go together.” Bridget said. She looks so scared.

“No. It’ll be okay, Bridge. I promise.”

What will happen if I don’t make it back to the car? Will Tasha be able to take care of her until Mom and Dad make it to the cabin?

She'll have to. God, please, if something happens to me then let Tasha have the strength to keep them safe.

"Tasha." She was staring off at the sky. "Natasha!"

"What!"

"Pay attention, okay?"

"Yeah, alright." She sniffled and wiped her face.

"Anything happens, if anything looks bad or someone shows up, just leave. Promise me you'll go."

"I'm not leaving you here." she said. She sniffled again.

"Yes, you will. Because if something happens to me you have to take care of these three."

"No, I..."

"You said it would be okay." Bridget whined.

"It will. I just have to plan for in case it isn't, okay."

"You're just going to walk up there?" Amber asked me.

"That's the plan. So, um, if anything goes wrong, I love you Bridget. I love you Tasha." I really do. I wish I could tell her how much. "I don't know you two well enough to love you, but I wish you the best." I told Amber and David.

"I love you." Bridget said.

"Be careful." Tasha said. "I love you, Becca. Just come back, okay?"

It was hard to walk up toward the house in the dark. There could be dogs or snakes or wolves, and there's no way I could see them. But worst of all is that there could be people sick from those bombs, spreading their disease and attacking innocent bystanders like myself.

Innocent. That's funny. Okay, I've shot someone, made my best friend speed, ran stop signs, ignored people that needed help. Oh, and I sort of kidnapped two kids. So yeah, I'm innocent.

I looked back and David was aiming the gun off in the distance, one eye closed. And this is who I'm trusting my life to? Great.

I knocked on the door. I almost turned and ran just from the echo of my hand against the wood. My heart was beating so loud I could barely hear, barely think. But I *could* hear, and I thought there was someone moving inside.

"Is someone there?" I asked. I knocked again. "Hello. We just need a place to sleep tonight. Just for tonight."

"Go away." was the reply. It sounded like an old man.

"We just want to sleep on the floor. We'll be gone in the morning. I swear."

"We don't want your trouble, just go."

"Melvin, she's just a girl." a woman's voice said.

"There's me and my little sister, and my friend and two other kids. We're just kids. Please. My parents made me promise to take care of my sister, I need a safe place for her to sleep. We'll be leaving to go meet our parents in the morning. We won't be any trouble." I'm sobbing, begging now. "Please."

"You're not sick?" he asked.

"No. None of us."

"Have you been around anyone who was sick?"

"No. Huh-uh. Please, my Mom and Dad went to get Grandma, and then we're supposed to meet them in Colorado, and... I'm just so

tired. Please, let us in.”

There was a couple of minutes of them shuffling around on the other side of the door. I stood there with my forehead against it, crying and waiting. And then the door opened. I stepped back and looked up and found myself staring at the end of a massive shotgun.

“You’re not sick?” he asked. An old man in overalls, probably seventy or eighty.

“No. Not at all.”

“There are five of you?” the woman asked. Similarly old, but she was in a long flowery dress that looked five sizes too big.

“Alrighty, get ‘em inside then.” he said, waving the shotgun around enough to make me nervous.

I hurried out to the car and took the gun away from David. These people are scared, they’d probably shoot him if he waved that thing around them. Or he’d shoot that old man.

We grabbed a couple of bags from the trunk, locked the car, and hurried inside. The old man bolted three dead bolt locks, then slid a heavy dresser in front of the door. I wonder why he thinks that would stop them. I mean there’s a glass window two feet to the left.

“Sorry to bother you.” I said.

“You’re all welcome here.” the old woman said.

“You can sleep in here.” he said, waving toward the living room. “I want you out first thing in the morning.”

“Ed, don’t be so rude.”

“We can’t take care of a bunch of kids! We’re lucky to have

enough for ourselves. The whole world is going to hell.”

“We’ll be out as soon as we get some sleep. I promise. We’re supposed to meet my parents in a few days, anyway.”

“Do you children want something to eat?” she asked us.

“We’ve got food, ma’am.” I said.

“Don’t any of the others talk?” the man, Ed, asked.

I turned and looked at them. They’re all huddled together, and clearly terrified of this old couple. Or maybe just terrified of everything in general. Me too. But there’s no point in being rude to these people.

“Bridget, come here.” I said. I held my hand out toward her. She shook her head no. I glared at her for a few seconds and she reluctantly slid from the others, to my side. “This is my sister, Bridget.” I said. I nudged her with my elbow.

“Hi.” she squeaked.

“Nice to meet you, dear.” the woman said.

“This is my best friend, Natasha.” I said. I grabbed her hand and pulled her closer.

“Thank you for letting us stay.” she managed. She’s so scared.

“And those two are some friends of my sister, I never met them until today. Amber and David.”

They both gave a tiny wave, but didn’t say anything. The old couple nodded. The guy looks like he’d be happy to shoot us and shove our bodies out the door. I don’t trust him.

“And what’s your name, dear?” the lady asked.



"I'm... just totally exhausted." I said. "My name is Rebecca Lang."

"Well you're safe now, Rebecca." she told me. "I can get you kids some blankets to lay on, and we might have a couple of pillows. I'll need some help carrying them."

"Amber, David, go with her."

"Why don't you..." David began. His sister whacked his arm. "I mean... yeah, sure."

Ed made us move the furniture around so we would have room to sit. But he couldn't move it, he said, his back was bad. And then when we slid the sofa he complained that we'd scratch the floor. Like his sliding a dresser in front of the door didn't do that already?

They brought back a stack of blankets, but only two pillows. We started spreading blankets out on the floor. The old couple said goodnight and went upstairs and locked themselves in their bedroom.

"Maybe some of us could use folded up blankets for pillows." Amber suggested.

"Good thinking, Amber."

"I'll spread your blanket out for you." she said.

"Thanks."

"Wow Amber, why don't you take a minute to wipe the drool from your chin first." David said.

"I'm just trying to be helpful!" she snapped at him.

"My sister likes you." he told me. "She's a gay. Mom and Dad hate it, too."

"I was just spreading the blanket out because you're holding the gun." she said defensively.

“Oh, I... uh...” I sputtered, and I could feel myself blushing.

She's gay too? Wow, what are the odds of that? And she likes me. Um... weird. I don't think any other girl has ever liked me. At least that way. I'm not sure how to feel about that.

“I appreciate it.” I told her. “You guys all go to sleep. I'll keep watch for a while. David, I'll wake you up in two or three hours.”

I walked around, looking out the windows, as the others stretched out. I hope they can sleep. Especially Tasha. She's under a lot of strain, not knowing about her Mom and Dad. I guess we all are. But she has to be rested to drive.

“What if we're the only people left?” David asked.

“Go to sleep.” Amber told him.

“What if?”

“Then we'll have to kill you so the rest of us can get some sleep.” she said.

“Highly unlikely.” he said. “Being the only remaining male, that makes me important. If we want to perpetuate the species, you would all have to make sure I was safe. It's not like there would be a lot of options for fathers of your babies, ya know.”

“Jeez, that really is all guys think about, isn't it?” I asked.

“Hey, if I'm all you got left...”

“Okay, well even if you weren't just thirteen, you're the last person I'd sleep with.”

“What's wrong with me?” he asked. “You're too good for me?”

“You're not a girl.” I told him.

“Well, there’s that. So if we were the only people left, that means you and Amber would be stuck together, being the only two lesbians.”

“And you’re perfect for each other.” Bridget said. She started laughing. “I knew you would be.”

“Wait, this is the girl in your class?” Tasha asked. “You’re sneaky.”

“Go to sleep.” I ordered everyone.

Okay, well, now I’m stuck taking care of the little girl my sister tried to set me up with. Where are her parents? Where are *my* parents. God, please take care of them.

Thursday April 7th

I never woke David. I was way too wired to sleep anyway. When the others started waking, I stood and stretched and tried to look awake for them. I have to be strong and look confident. Dad said so.

We left the blankets folded in a neat little pile on the sofa when we left. We had to slide the dresser out of the way to get out, and then we locked the door and closed it behind us. Surely that's enough until they wake up. They don't need three dead bolts and a dresser. Beside, there's the window.

"Bridget, here." I handed her the map. "You navigate for a while."

"I suck with maps." she whined.

"Try."

"No. You do it."

"Bridge," I'm so tired I can't read it, Bridget. Except I can't tell her that. "I'm trying to pay attention in case we see anybody."

"I'll do it." Amber said.

For the next hour Amber gave directions like a pro. Turn here, there's a small road there, we could go this way and avoid main roads.

We found a lot full of cars and pulled in. I got out and walked around, keeping my eyes open for any danger, while the others tried to figure out how to siphon gas. We don't dare go near a gas station right now. We passed one a while back, it was swarmed. I don't know how many of those people were sick and how many were just going a little nutty from all of this, but there were pipes being swung at

people, screaming, a guy jumping on top of cars. It was awful.

“Hurry up.” I told him.

“We’re trying.” Tasha said.

“I saw a car just up the road. If they head this way we have to get out.”

“Got it, Becca. Relax.”

If I relax I’ll fall asleep. I can’t do it. Not now. I’m responsible. If I went to sleep and anything happened to any of them Mom and Dad would blame me. Keeping these guys safe is my responsibility.

“Becca!” Tasha shook my arm. “Hey, you here? I said we’re ready.”

“Right. Let’s go.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, sure.”

All day long we only passed three cars. Sometimes we passed people walking. Once one of them stepped to the side of the road, like he may try to step in front and stop us, but I held the gun out the window and he stepped away. A few times we passed some of the ones that aren’t quite people anymore. They were oozing and stumbling, and some had chunks of skin falling off and green pus underneath. It was so disgusting.

Tasha drove late into the night. She didn’t want to stop. The others slept in the back seat. It was midnight when we reached Uncle Bill’s cabin.

“Finally, bed.” David said, almost sounding excited.

“No, no beds.” I told him. “Tonight we sleep in the living room. It’s safer. We’ll figure out the rest tomorrow.”

“Becca, come on.” Bridget whined.

“No. Not tonight.”

“Fine, whatever. You suck.”

“Just get ready for bed.”

“I’m not tired. Why don’t the lights work?”

“Because the power is out. And Dad told you to listen to me, Bridget.”

“Well he’s not here.” she said. “He may never be here.”

She started crying. Not the I’m scared crying, but really, truly, grieving type of crying. And then the others did, too. All of them. They were all worried about their parents. I had to wander out of the room, into the kitchen, to keep from sobbing along with them.

“Becca, the phone is ringing. The phone works!” Tasha was shouting.

“What?” I stepped back into the living room. “I didn’t hear a phone.”

“No, I’m calling, but it’s working.”

“Who are you calling?”

“My parents.” After a couple of minutes she put the phone down. “It just keeps ringing. It doesn’t even go to voice mail.”

“Sorry, Tasha.”

“It’s okay. I’m not giving up hope.”

“I’m sure they’re fine.”

“Can I try my parents?” Amber asked.

She tried calling her parents, with no luck. Bridget called Dad’s cell phone, but he didn’t answer, either. I didn’t really expect it. We’ve seen a lot of destruction on the way here. People have torn so many things apart. We’re attacked and people freak out and destroy our own country. Brilliant.

While everyone else laid down to sleep, I found a radio and plugged headphones in and listened to the latest news on the only station I found that was broadcasting. Atlanta is gone. Not just people sick, but gone. The army bombed it to try to stop the spread of this disease.

The guy on the radio said over ninety eight percent of people catch it when exposed. People go crazy and lose all rational thought. Many wander aimlessly, some walk off into the water and just drown. Some attack others.

I guess there have been similar attacks on every continent except Antarctica. And between us and the Russians we’ve dropped nuclear bombs on half the major cities. Humanity is ending.

“Becca.” Tasha sat next to me and put her arm around my shoulders. “You okay?”

“Go back to sleep.”

“When was the last time you slept?”

“I’m fine. I have to keep watch.”

“You’re so tired you can hardly see. You’re going to screw up and shoot one of us if you don’t rest.”

“This is my responsibility.”

up.”  
“Just show me how to use that thing. Just the basics. I’ll stay

“You’re tired too.”

“Not as tired as you are.”

“Tasha,”

“Please just let me help.”

“Okay. Okay. You just sort of aim the whole thing toward what you want to shoot and pull the trigger. This is the safety. Leave it on until you think you might need it. Don’t point the barrel at yourself or anyone else unless you plan to shoot them.”

“Got it.”

“I can stay awake. You should just go to sleep.”

“Go to bed, Rebecca.”

“I... okay.”

“Goodnight.” She hugged me.

“I love you, Natasha.”

“Love you too.”

Except I’m in love with her. I don’t just love her like a friend, or like the sister she once said she felt like we were. All day long, with everything else on my mind, I have had thoughts of Tasha. I’m more worried about what happens to her parents than what happens to mine, which is screwed up. But if my parents die I’ll be horribly sad and feel awful. If her parents die, she’ll feel horribly sad and awful. I’d rather be the sad one.



**Monday, April 11th**

We've been doing our best by ourselves, but we're getting more worried about our

parents. The radio stopped broadcasting. The last we heard, there were very few healthy people left. Anywhere. In the world. The last hour of broadcast was just a man reading prayers and saying that the end has come.

I took the others outside yesterday and showed them everything Dad showed me about using the gun. I took the other gun from the bag and we've made sure that two of us have one at all times now. I still think I'm going to be one of the ones standing guard each night. These people are my responsibility.

"You don't like me at all?" Amber asked. We were alone, sitting on the hood of the car.

"What? I never said that. I just don't know you."

"You seem to not like me."

"I guess I'm just in a bad mood. I've been sort of grouchy. Sorry if I've been mean or anything."

"But you don't like me?"

"You seem okay." I said, shrugging.

"But you don't like me like me."

"Um, you're a kid." Thanks Bridget. Thanks for telling her I'd be interested.

"I'm almost as old as you."

"You're fourteen."

"David's right, you don't have a lot of options. If you're ever

going to fall in love, I'm it." she smiled.

"Sorry. I just don't see that happening." And that's not it. I can be in love, I just can't have someone love me back.

"I'm just saying you should be open to the possibility. Since we might very well be the last people on the planet."

"I'll keep that in mind."

So what, everyone is gone, let's give up on our families and just worry about who we have left to date now? Some people have messed up priorities. Though I guess I'm one to talk, right? I spend all my time wishing for someone I can't have.

"I think you're really pretty." she said.

"Uh... thanks, I guess?"

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm just asking."

"Amber, I'm sorry, this isn't going to happen."

"I heard you before. I'm just curious if you think I'm pretty."

"Okay, this conversation has gotten way uncomfortable."

"It's a simple question. I won't be offended if you don't. Everyone has their own opinion."

"Uh, um, sure I guess. You're not bad looking, for a kid."

"But nothing like Natasha?"

I didn't know what to say to that. It's like being called out for a lie you told. There's no response that helps. This is bad. She says that, and she blows the whole mess up. But she can't know how I feel, so

maybe she just thinks Tasha is pretty?

“Do *you* think she’s pretty?” I asked.

“Of course. But I don’t have a crush on her, like you do.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?” Tell me this isn’t happening, that it’s just stress and sleep deprivation that’s causing me to think she’s onto me.

“When David was talking the other night and you said he was the last person you’d sleep with, you kept looking over at Natasha.”

“Maybe I was embarrassed about what she would think because she’s my best friend.”

“You watch her all the time.”

“And you know this because?”

“Because I watch you all the time, too.” she admitted. “And then when she looks up at you for anything, or when you’re talking, you keep glancing away and blushing, like you think she’s going to figure you out.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“Maybe. I don’t think so, though.”

“Why are we having this discussion?”

“Because I think you should tell her.”

“Okay, well, you’re just wrong, and... I’m glad we had this talk.” I slid off the hood.

“You’ll feel better with it out in the open. Even if she doesn’t feel the same way.”

Sure I will. Hey Tasha, I love you. What’s that? Oh, you hate my guts and no longer want to be my friend. Sure. Hey, maybe she’ll wander off alone, because I make her uncomfortable, and then she can go off by herself and die.

“What makes you the expert?” I asked. I was staring down the road, unable to look at her.

“My Mom was in love with one of our neighbors last year.”

“I thought your Mom and Dad...”

“Dad knew. Later. She told him. But she was in love with this guy, and he was their friend, and it was awkward. And she eventually told him. He completely rejected her, but she felt better. It was a relief just knowing it was over.”

“And your Dad stayed with her?”

“She still loves him, too. I think it’s complicated. But it’s not like she cheated on him or anything. She told him about it.”

“He wasn’t jealous?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

I got back up on the hood. I don’t want to go inside right now, anyway. I’d just wind up staring at Tasha. Maybe she’s right, maybe I should just tell her.

“What about you?” I asked. “Apparently you’re here because my sister decided to play matchmaker.”

“I’d probably be dead if she didn’t. What about me?”

“You’re not... jealous?”

“I barely know you, and I know how you feel about me. You think I’m just a kid and you aren’t interested.”

“Sorry.”

“At least I know. I haven’t loved you as long as you’ve loved Natasha.”

“You *love* me?” That’s scary.

“Sort of.” She doesn’t even seem embarrassed. This girl is really brave.

“Okay, well, that’s just because of all the crap we’re going through and that I’m your only option. You don’t know me.”

“I think I’d really like you anyway, no matter what. But who knows, you could be right. Even if that’s the case, so? It doesn’t change how I feel.”

“Oh.” This is some hero worship thing because I saved her, I bet. “So what if you’re right? What if I am, and I tell her, and it goes bad?”

“It would be done then, at least.”

“She’s not a lesbian.”

“So? Life’s too short to worry about labels.”

“Where’d you hear that?” I asked, laughing.

“There’s a gay-straight group I’m part of online.”

“I just don’t know.”

So this girl is actually sort of deep and thoughtful for a kid. I hope we find someone for her one day. Just not me. I can definitely see why Bridget would think I’d be interested in her, though. I’m just not. I don’t know, if we’re still here in a few years, and if there’s nobody else alive, maybe I’d be interested. Maybe.

I was sitting up for my shift later that night, standing watch while they all slept, and I kept playing with the radio with hopes of finding some information. Any information at all.

“Are there any cookies left?” Tasha asked. She was on the stairs. We moved into the bedrooms upstairs a couple of nights ago. Second floor has to be safe, right? Nobody could reach the windows.

“Don’t know.”

“Score!” she said, pulling out five or six Oreos. “Here, have some.”

“No thanks.”

“Any news?” she asked, pointing at the radio. She opened the cookie and licked the center.

“No. Maybe Mom and Dad will be back soon and we’ll be able to leave and look for other people.”

“Maybe.”

She sat next to me and patted my leg. She’s giving me that sad, ‘I’m so sorry to be the one to tell you this’ look. I hate that look. Even on her.

“I still have hope.” she said.

“Me too.”

“But I’ve been thinking the past couple of days about it. There’s a very good chance I’ll never see my parents again. Even if they are alive.”

“You will. Tasha, you will!”

“I’m just being realistic, Becca. And I think they’re dead, really. It sucks, and I miss them, but with six billion other people dead I just don’t have the energy to feel too overwhelmed by their deaths. That sounds awful. I just mean they’re only two people, and all those others died too.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“We have to start planning on what happens next.”

“Mom and Dad...”

“Becca, you know there’s a good chance they aren’t coming. They would have been here by now.”

“You don’t know that!”

“No, I don’t. And they could show up in a few days and that would be great. I love your Mom and Dad almost like they were my own. I’m just saying... don’t get your hopes up. I can’t have you falling apart on us now. You’re the strong one here. I flake out every time I see a spider, I sure as heck can’t think of what to do if we’re being attacked by a bunch of rabid zombies, or whatever they are.”

Zombies. They aren’t zombies. They die if you shoot them. They’re human. Stop calling them zombies. Just because they attack and bite people and seem blood thirsty doesn’t mean they’re zombies.

“I’m weak.” I said. “It took me forever to admit that I’m gay.”

“But you did. And you feel better, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“See, you are strong.”

“Yeah.” I’m so strong I can’t tell her. Except I have to, eventually. “Tasha,” Why not now? “There’s something I need to tell you. The situation could be better,” I actually laughed. “But I just... have to say it.”

“Okay.”

“See, um,” I looked away from her. Why is it so hard to say things like this? “You don’t have to respond to this in any way, and don’t feel like you have to do or say anything. This isn’t about you, it’s about me, and I just need this out there. I know... how you feel already, I just need to say it out loud.”

“Say it.” she said. “Whatever it is.”

“I’m... in love with you.”

She didn’t say anything. I told her she didn’t have to, but I actually expected her to at least tell me she was sorry, but she couldn’t think of me like that. Or tell me that I was being silly. I didn’t expect her to ignore me.

“I’m sorry if that bothers you. I didn’t mean it to.”

“It doesn’t, Becca. I just don’t know what to say to that.”

“I’m sorry.” Great, start crying. Brilliant.

“Don’t.” She hugged me. “I’m flattered. You know I love you, but...”

“But you’re not gay.”

“No. I mean I’m open minded and all, but I’m not sure I could think of *any* girl that way.”

“I know. I just needed to say it.”

“I’m sorry. Please don’t let this come between us, Becca. You’re my favorite person in the world. It would kill me if you were mad at me over this.”

“Me mad? What... no, I just thought *you’d* be mad at *me*.”

“No. Rebecca, I value your opinion more than anyone’s. If you think so highly of me... that just feels really good, okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“So we’re good?”

“Yeah, still best friends. Forever.”



**Wednesday, April 13th**

I made bacon and eggs for breakfast for everyone. It needed used anyway. This

is just about the last of our food. We have a few cans of beans and some corn, but nothing that makes a healthy meal.

“I want everyone to get ready to go when you’re done eating.” I told them. Natasha put her spoon down and swept her hair back behind her ears. “We’re getting low on food.”

“We’re supposed to stay here until Mom and Dad get back.” Bridget said.

“We need food.”

“We can get by for a couple of days until they come.” she said.

“No, we’re going.”

“What if they show up while we’re gone?”

“I don’t know” I told her. “We’ll leave a note.”

“Well then why don’t you just go by yourself?”

“You’re coming.”

“No.” she said defiantly.

“I vote we stay here.” David said.

“Yeah, see.” Bridget said, her face twisted in anger. “Me too. I’m staying.”

“This isn’t a democracy! You’re coming.”

“You’re not my boss, Becca.”

“Yes, I am. Dad said...”

“Well when they show up I’m going to tell them how...”

“They’re not coming!” I shouted at her. I slammed my spoon down next to the bowl and slid the chair out.

They’re all staring at me. Amber and David look scared of me now. Bridget is crying and she is looking at me like *I* killed them. Tasha is giving me this look that says I handled this all wrong.

“You don’t know that.” Bridget mumbled. “They could be here any day.”

“Bridget, they would be here by now.”

“You don’t know that!” She shouted at me. She actually threw her spoon at me.

“Bridge,”

“Shut up!”

I blew this. Tasha looks so upset with me. What would you have me do, Tash?

I went around the table and wrapped my arms around Bridget. She struggled against me at first, but I kept holding her. Eventually she let me hug her and we cried together.

“I’m sorry, honey.” I said. “I really hope they get here soon, okay? But we have to continue doing the right things until they do. Dad made me responsible for you, and there is no way I’m leaving you here where you could get hurt or killed and I won’t be around to take care of you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I just want to make sure you’re okay. We’re coming back here, we just need to make a run for some food and supplies.”

“Do you really think they aren’t coming?”

“I’m so sorry, honey. I just don’t think they are. I hope they do.”

“Mom and Dad can’t be dead. I’d know it.”

“They wouldn’t want us to just sit here and die while we wait for them. We have to take care of ourselves. I have to take care of you, okay? Just come with me to get some supplies and we’ll come back.”

“I guess.”

I went upstairs to gather some bags to carry food in, and to change into some better clothes for this mission. Can’t really wear sandals if you plan on doing a lot of running.

“Can I help?” Amber asked. She was right behind me, and I jumped.

“Oh! Don’t sneak up on me.”

“Sorry. Need some help getting bags and stuff?”

“Um, yeah, sure.” I said. I tossed her some of the bags.

“I’m sorry about your mom and dad.”

“Well, we don’t know anything yet.”

“I’m pretty sure we do, though.” she told me.

“We’re not the only ones losing our parents.”

“I guess I knew my parents were dead a few days ago.” She shrugged. “Nothing I can do about it. David seems to think there’s still hope.”

“Poor kid.” I said. I feel so bad for him. For all of us, really, but at least we know our parents were okay the last we saw them.

“Must be a thing with the youngest children. See, we’re both oldest of two. We have that in common.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So did you tell Natasha how you feel?”

“Not that it’s your business, but yes.”

“I’m sorry it didn’t go the way you wanted it to, Becca.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll survive. At least she didn’t get mad or anything. We’re still friends.”

“Good.” She said. She folded the bags over and squeezed them against herself. “For you *and* for me.” She smiled.

“Amber, I’m sorry, but no.”

“We’ll see. I can be patient.” She smiled again. The girl is persistent. “A year from now you’ll wonder what it was like before we met.”

“You certainly are a confident girl, I’ll give you that.”

“I’m just willing to go after what I want.”

David wasn’t very happy when I made him give the second gun to Tasha. But I trust her more. He’s a good shot, but he’s twitchy. He gets scared and waves the gun. He’s a kid. Tasha is more stable and less easily spooked. Of course I didn’t tell him that. I told him we needed his muscles to carry the food.

We drove toward the nearest town, thirty miles away. There were wrecked cars everywhere. Like people were sick and trying to drive anyway, and they just didn’t get too far. There are some dead bodies. I saw someone walking off in the distance, at the back of one of the fields. They were sort of weaving, and they didn’t look good. I just hoped the others didn’t see them. There is no reason to scare them.

“Okay, Tasha, pull up here.”

“What, here?”

“Yeah.”

“You want us to walk?” Bridget asked.

“That’s the idea.”

“But isn’t that *more* dangerous?”

“We drive the car into the center of town and it’ll be like yelling for them to come get us. This way we can go quietly and avoid everyone.”

“Don’t forget the bags.” Tasha told them.

“Everyone stay as quiet as possible. I’ll go first. I want Tasha last. Everyone keep their eyes open.”

You could see people moving several blocks ahead. I cut back into an alley, hoping to avoid them. It was quiet. No dogs barking. Either no dogs in this neighborhood or they’re all dead. They wouldn’t have starved by now, would they? Poor doggies. I wonder if that disease spreads from human to animal. Please tell me the people didn’t bite the dogs.

There was a sound and I spun toward it and raised the gun. There was a man-- or what used to be one-- banging against the wooden fence. The fence was only about four foot tall, but he couldn’t see us. His eyes had been gouged out. There was blood running down his face, still, and it looked so painful. He wasn’t screaming or moaning in pain, he was simply banging against the fence.

I turned to everyone and held my finger up to my mouth, shushing them. We walked very slowly past the back of the house. At one point I looked back and saw Tasha shoving Amber along. Amber’s eyes were locked on the man banging against the fence. She looked about two seconds away from a full panic attack.

We turned back to the main road and continued on. There was a small store just a block away. I pointed to make sure everyone knew where we were headed, and I continued on. I opened the door to the shop and looked around. Empty. It was a little trashed from other people raiding it, but there didn't seem to be anyone inside.

"Go in and check the back, Tasha. I'll keep a watch out here."

"Got it."

She went inside. Before the others could even follow her in three people came hurrying toward us from behind a van. Amber screamed and turned to run, tripping and falling down instead. Bridget grabbed David and blocked his body with her own, protecting him. I froze.

They were a family. The man was probably six foot tall, dressed in what was once a nice suit. The woman, who I think was his wife, was short and blonde and looked like she used to be bubbly. She was probably a cheerleader in high school. The youngest was just a kid, maybe eight. She had a light brown hair, cut exactly as Bridget's was at that age. She was Bridget's height and weight when she was that age, too. So much like Bridget.

"Becca!" Amber screamed.

I snapped out of my daze and pulled the gun up, quickly firing at the guy and striking him in the chest. He stumbled back and fell over. I shot the woman in the head and she dropped straight to the ground where she was. No stumbling, no falling over, just crumpled down on herself.

The girl kept coming. I swung the gun onto her, but then it was like I was aiming at Bridget. I just killed her parents, how could I kill

her? But... but she was actually getting close to Bridget and David. I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger.

I dropped the gun and began to cry. And then I heard another gunshot. I looked toward the building and saw Tasha holding the gun out. I looked to where she was aiming and saw that the man had gotten back up.

Everyone was staring all around, glancing repeatedly back to me. Tasha came over and put her arms around me.

“It’s okay now.” she said.

“She looked so much like Bridget.” I whispered.

“I know. It’s okay.”

“We should go.” Amber said. “There’ll be more. They must have heard the shots. We need to go.”

“No!” I said. I bent over and picked up the gun. “Same plan. I’ll stand guard and you guys go get the food we need. Cans, mostly. Nothing that can go bad if not refrigerated.”

“You sure you’re up to this?” Tasha asked.

“I’m fine. Go check the back room to make sure nobody comes out and gets them.”

There was sound down the road. Voices. I watched the road, hoping that we had found some others that could help us. Except it didn’t sound like they were too friendly.

“We’re done.” Bridget said.

“Shh.”

“What?”

“Um,” They were all staring at me, like I was supposed to be in charge here. Oh yeah, I am. “You’re all going back to the car. Tasha, you’re in charge.”

“What about you?” Amber asked.

“I have to go check something.” I pointed down the road. “I’ll be right behind you, okay.”

“I’ll come with you.” she said.

“No, you’re going back with Tasha.”

“You shouldn’t be alone.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Becca, you can’t do this.” Bridget whined. “Well you just can’t go, you’re supposed to take care of us.”

“Tasha will take care of you.”

“But Dad said...”

“I’ll be there in a while, Bridget.”

“But... what if something happens to you?”

“It won’t.”

“I’ll be alone.”

“Bridge, I’ll be fine and I’ll be there in two minutes.”

“What’s so damn important?” she asked, sounding very much older and angrier than any thirteen year old should be.

“I’ll tell you when I get there. Just go. I’ll be okay, Bridget. Now go, I love you.”

“Well goodbye then, I guess.” she said. She turned her face away from me and struck a defiant posture.

“Tasha will take care of you if anything happens.”

“Whatever.”



“Tasha, please?”

“Just hurry back, Becca.” Tasha told me. “If this is important, fine, but hurry back.”

“I will. Be careful.”

They went their way, and I went the opposite direction so I could check on the voices. I snuck around a couple of buildings, and down an alley, then between two houses. And there they were. Heading toward where we just left, probably heading toward the sound of the guns.

Seven... no, eight guys. All with huge guns. Between them, being shoved around by two of the guys, were three women, probably all mid twenties to early thirties. The guys were pointing guns at them, shouting at them, shoving and hitting them. The girls were covered in bruises. I can't let these guys find the others. The world falls apart and the first thing those guys think about is holding those women hostage? And what are they doing with them? I really don't want to know, I guess. Those poor women.

I hurried back, running as fast as I could so we could be out of town before those guys had any idea where we were. Except I bumped into one of the stumblers. He was just shuffling and stumbling around, and when I ran into him his arms wrapped around me. I screamed, and wiggled, and finally got free. That was too close! I hurried back to the car and climbed into the front seat.

“Go!” I shouted.

“What's going on?” Bridget asked. Tasha spun the tires taking off.

“There were people.” I said. I started crying again.

“What? We have to go back!” Amber shouted.

“No. Huh-uh. There were a bunch of guys... beating and

shoving three women around.”

“Are you serious?” David asked. “We can’t just leave them behind, then.”

“The guys all had huge guns, like army guns, and there is nothing we could do.”

“We could hide and pick them off one at a time.” he said.

“No.”

“We can’t leave...”

“It’s them or us! I made a promise to take care of you, and I’m going to do it. That means I have to choose whether to save your sorry ass or those women. It sucks, but there’s nothing I can do about it!”

“Calm down. We know, okay.” Tasha told me. “Are you okay?”

“Just stressed and scared.” I said, wiping at my face.

“No, I mean your arm. What did you cut it on.”

“Oh... shit.”

I’m dead. I’ve got that disease. I don’t want to die! Okay, okay. I have to protect them. But if I’m dead I can’t do that. If I’m stumbling around trying to bite people I can’t. But I can’t survive this. Shit! I wish Dad were here. Why me? Why did I get this? How could I be so stupid!

“Stop the car.” I said.

“What? Becca...”

“Stop the car, Tasha!”

She swerved to the side and slid to a stop. I opened the door and got out and kicked the fender, then the door, then a huge rock. That one hurt. Everyone was getting out of the car.

“Bridget, I’m so sorry honey.” I told her. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I have to go.” I whined. “Come here.” I held my arms out and she stepped into them. “I love you so much. I would do *anything* to protect you. You know that, right?”

“Becca,” Bridget whimpered.

“When Mom and Dad show up, tell them I did my best.”

“Tell them yourself.” she said. She sounds flat and lifeless all of a sudden. “What’s going on?”

“Just a new plan.” I said. I stepped back from her. “I’m going to go back and try to save those women.”

“You’ll be killed!” Amber shouted.

“I already was.” I pointed at my arm. “One of the infected ones got me on the way back.”

“No!” Bridget shouted. She grabbed onto me and hugged me. “No, Rebecca, it’s just a scratch. It’s just a scratch, you’ll be okay.”

“No, honey, everybody who is exposed to this gets sick.”

“You could wait and see if you get sick.” Tasha said. She’s sobbing. “Please.”

“I can’t take that chance. I could infect one of you.”

“You’re not going.” Amber told me. “We won’t let you.”

“You have to stay.” David said. “Who’s going to be in charge if you’re gone?”

“Tasha will take care of you.”

“Becca, please.” Bridget said. I pulled away from her.

“I can’t risk it, Bridge. I have to go. Please, just let me go. I’ll try to save those women and if I can I’ll send them your way.”

“This is wrong.” Tasha said. She hugged me. “You have to stay with me. I can’t do this, Becca.”

“You have to. Please, Tasha, I need you to take care of Bridget. And I need you to take care of yourself.”

“Y-you’re going to need... more bullets.” Tasha said. She was heading toward the trunk of the car. “Please come back.”

“I have to go.”

“Take care of yourself. If you’re not sick in the next twenty four hours, come back. Please. It’s worth the risk to me.”

I took the extra bullets and turned and ran toward the town. There were shouts and crying behind me. And about a hundred yards later there was someone running along beside me. Amber.

“What are you doing?” I panted.

“Going with you.”

“Go back.”

“I’m with you.”

“Why are you doing this?” I slowed to a walk.

“Because I love you.”

“You don’t know me!”

“I don’t care about that.”

“You’re a little girl with a crush on someone who you think saved your life.”

“Yep.”

“You’ll get over it.”

“Probably.”

“So go back.”

“Can’t do it. Logic can tell me what I feel isn’t real love, but that doesn’t change how I feel. Besides, I’m fourteen, what do I know about love?”

“Exactly!”

“My point was I don’t know the difference. So I’m going with you.”

“You’re insane.”

“Probably.”

“Go back!” I shoved her.

“I’m not going.”

This is stupid. I’m trying to save their lives and she insists on killing herself. And they let her come? Oh, guess not, here’s the rest of them in the car. Good. Maybe they can talk some sense into her.

“You have to go!” I shouted at her.

“I’d rather die with you than live without.”

“No.” I pointed the gun at her. “You’re going back.”

“So you’d shoot me to save my life?”

“I...” That doesn’t make much sense, does it? “Just let me go!”

“I’m not doing that.” Amber said.

“You have to do that.”

“No.” Tasha said. “Becca, you’ve been my best friend forever. I love you. So you’re coming back with us and we’ll wait and see if you get sick.”

“It’s too dangerous.” I said, shaking my head vigorously.

“We’re not letting you go. We’re a team.”

“Tasha,”

“If it were me, would you let me go?”

“I... no.” I admitted. “But it’s not the same.”

“How is it not the same?” David asked.

“Because I’m in love with her.” I explained. And then I felt bad, because it probably embarrasses Tasha when I say things like that.

“And *I*’m in love with you.” Amber said. The others all turned toward her. “What? Like it’s a secret?”

“You can’t be in love with me, you’ve known me a week.”

“Lesbians are all screwed up.” David said, laughing. Great, laugh while I’m dying.

I don’t know how to make this easier for them. I thought just leaving right now would be best, but they’re all so insistent that I come with them. Wouldn’t it be harder for them to watch me getting sick? But I don’t want to leave. I don’t want to die.

“Please come back.” Tasha said.

“What if I get sick?”

“What if you don’t?” Bridget asked. “Don’t leave me alone, Becca. Please. Mom and Dad may never come, and I don’t have anyone else.”

“Tasha...”

“Isn’t family!”

“She’s practically a sister to you.”

“But she’s *not* my sister, you are. Please. Just come back.”

“If you start to get sick we’ll let you go.” Tasha said.

“What if it’s too late? What if I get sick so fast, and... and... I don’t want to hurt any of you.”

“You won’t.”

“I...” I nodded. I turned the gun around and held it out, by the barrel, toward Bridget. “Y-you have to take this. And Bridget, if anything... if I try to hurt anyone, you have to promise me that you’ll, um, stop me. Whatever it takes.”

“I can’t shoot you.” she whispered.

“You have to. Or you, Tasha. Someone. I’m not going back if you won’t promise me you’ll protect yourselves.”

“If I have to.” Tasha said. “But it won’t ever come to that.”

“I’ll go. But... please don’t let me hurt any of you.”

“Thank you.” Amber said. She came over and wrapped her arms around me.

We got back into the car. Okay, so they all care enough about me to want me to stay. That’s good, I guess. As long as it doesn’t get them all killed.

I wonder what it’s like to be dead. Do you go to some soothing place? Heaven? And if heaven exists, and you do go there if you’re a good and deserving person, would I? Do I deserve to go there? Have I done the right things in my life, been good enough, to get into such a place? And if I were infected and turned into a crazy cannibal, would that be overlooked because I had no say in the matter? Would I get to see Mom and Dad again?

We got back to the cabin and went inside. I tried to stay away from their food, I didn’t want to accidentally infect someone. We sat on the sofas and ate. Most of us didn’t eat much. And everyone was staring at me. It’s annoying.

“Don’t let people tell you who to be, Bridget.” I said.

“Huh?”

“Not even Mom and Dad. Stand up for yourself. Don’t be afraid to take chances, but be smart about it.”

“Becca,”

“You are special. You’re sweet, and smart, and you deserve the best in life, okay? Remember that. Always. And don’t just sleep with the first person you think you like a little. You’re better than that. Always use protection, you don’t want to be a mother before you’re ready.”

“What is this?” Tasha asked.

“I’m trying to think of all the advice I’d give her if I were around in the next few years. Whatever I forget, I’m sure you’ll take care of, right?”

“You’ll be around.” Bridget said.

“I hope so. I really want to see you grow up and see how you turn out.”

“Stop talking like this.” She started crying again. It hasn’t been long since she stopped.

“I’m sorry, honey.”

We kind of sat there most of the day, not saying or doing much of anything. After a while I got used to them all staring at me, I guess. I just waited along with the rest of them for me to get sick. We have no idea how long it takes. Eventually the three younger kids fell asleep on the sofa across from me. Tasha was still awake, sitting next to me.

“It’s late.” she said. It’s dark outside. “I think you would have gotten sick by now if you were going to.”

“Maybe. Who knows?”

“How long do you plan to wait until you’re convinced you’re going to be okay?”

“Maybe by this time tomorrow. I mean I still won’t be



comfortable for a while, but maybe it'll be okay by then."

"I hope so."

"I'm sorry if I embarrassed you earlier."

"When?"

"When I said I was in love with you."

"You didn't embarrass me, Becca. Why would I be embarrassed?"

"I don't know." I shrugged.. "So I was thinking earlier about that time in third grade, when we were playing kickball at recess. You swore to me you were going to kick it over the fence. And you ran up and kicked so hard at the ball."

"But I missed and fell flat on my ass." she said, laughing.

"I was scared, I thought you were really hurt."

"And you ran all the way over from second base to check on me."

"But you were laughing. You were crying,"

"I twisted my ankle, it hurt."

"But you were laughing, too."

"Because I knew how stupid it must have looked." she said, laughing again.

"That was, um, when I first knew. That I was in love with you, I mean."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

It was weird for a minute. She looked away, and she was smiling a little. I think she's crying. I shouldn't talk about this stuff, I upset her. And knowing her, she just feels bad because she thinks she's hurting me by not feeling the same way about me.

“It’s not your fault.” I said.

“What’s not?” she mumbled.

“I mean if you feel like bad or something that I’m upset that you don’t feel the same way. I knew you didn’t, Tasha. I know you’re not gay.”

“So why did you wait so long to tell me, if you knew from way back then?”

“I was scared. I didn’t want to lose you as a friend. And I knew you could never feel the same way because you’re straight.”

“You could never lose me as a friend.” she said. She looked over at me and smiled through her tears. “It’s so weird. I’ve never once thought about being with a girl.” she said. She laughed. “But someone confesses being in love with you and you kinda can’t help at least thinking about that, what it would be like.”

“I’m sorry, Tasha. I should never have said anything.”

“I’m glad you told me. I don’t want you to ever filter yourself because of me, Becca. You are the most important person in the world to me.”

“Your parents...”

“Are probably dead. Even if they’re not, I think losing them would be easier than losing you. I don’t know who I am if you’re not here.” She kinda laughed, but it had no humor in it. “That sounds so lame.”

“I know what you mean, though. In my head we’ve always been a team. Rebecca and Natasha. Never just one or the other. When you have something good happen, I feel so happy. And when you have something make you sad, I feel that way too.”

“Exactly.”

What’s it going to do to her if I do get sick? If I split up the team. I expect her to take care of Bridget, but who’s going to take care of Tasha?

“The thought wasn’t bad.” she said.

“What thought?”

“The idea of being with a girl. I mean you, not just any girl.”

“What?”

“I just imagined things, like *life*, ya know? All the points people usually care about. Marriage, kids, getting old, being sick in the hospital. I imagine it with a guy usually. But since you made your revelation, I’ve forced myself to imagine it with you.”

“Oh?”

“It wasn’t bad. I thought it would be, I thought I would spend the whole time with images of a guy popping in there, but it didn’t happen. I imagined us together, and it... I was happy.” She rubbed her eyes and laughed. “And confused.”

“I guess so.”

“I like guys, Becca. I’m straight.”

“I know. It’s okay.”

“I might make an exception.”

An exception? What is she talking about? An exception to what, then? Is this me dying, the confusion that comes with the insanity of that disease?

“What?” I finally asked. I felt tears trickling down my face.

“It would be hard for me, Becca. And there may be times, days even, when I have to be left alone. When I’ll need to just stop and reevaluate what I feel. And I may even just decide one day that I can’t do it any more, ya know? But... I love you. And I don’t know if it’s in that way, or even if it could ever be in that way, but if you want to try, I’d be okay with that.”

“Th-this isn’t just... because I’m dying?”

“You’re not. If you were going to get sick I think you would have by now.”

“Then, um, why are you telling me this now?”

“I don’t know. Because today I thought I’d lose you and it killed me.” She laughed again, another nervous laugh, and then she nodded over at the others. “And the thought that you would end up with her was just... awful.”

“So not going to happen.”

“I’m glad you say so, but honestly I wasn’t going to let it anyway.” she said.

“So, um... well... are you sure about... this?”

“No.” she said, laughing. “Have you not been listening? But I want to try it.”

“Are you sure you want to try?”

“Yes, Becca, I am.”

“So... so what do we do now?”

“Well, I was thinking we wake the others up and send them up to bed. That cannot be comfortable. And then we should probably get some rest, too.”

“I don’t... I mean I’m not sure I can guard tonight, Tasha. I don’t know if I can be trusted yet. Wait ‘til tomorrow to see if I’m sick, okay?”

“At some point we’re going to figure out a way to not need a guard every night. At least if we’re going to stay. An alarm or something, maybe?”

“With what electricity?”

“Well isn’t there some kind of battery powered thing we can get? You’re the brains behind this operation, Becca, you tell me.”

We got up and I was going to wake the others, but Tasha grabbed my hand. She kind of smiled at me, and I think she was blushing. Hard to tell in what little light we had from the lantern.

“What do you want to tell them?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean us. Like... we’re together.”

“Whatever makes you feel most comfortable, Tasha.”

“I guess we can tell them.” She pulled me close and wrapped her arms around me. “They’ll notice soon enough, anyway.”

“Oh will they?”

“Well... I mean I kinda figured you’d want to, um, kiss me?” she said. She’s looking at my feet. “I mean if I’m your girlfriend now, or whatever. I sort of figured we could get the first one out of the way now.”

“No.”

“No?” She looked up. “But...”

“First, you need to think about this and be sure.”

“I am, Becca.”

“And I have no idea if I’m sick. I won’t take a chance on infecting you.”

“You’re not sick.”

“We’ll wait.”

“Um, okay.”

“Besides, we’ve kissed before.”

“When?” she asked. She’s giving me one of those ‘you’re nuts’ looks.

“In fifth grade,”

“The play!” She said. “Yeah, we did. Did I thank you?”

“Yes, you did.”

She was in a play in fifth grade, and she was supposed to be kissed by a boy. She was scared, and she needed to practice the scene, so I stood in for the boy. It bothered me for a while that I had to pretend to be a boy to get her to kiss me.

“We should wake them.” I said.

“I guess.” She stepped back and laughed. “I’ve never actually said I was in a committed relationship before.”

“You still haven’t.”

“Did you forget the part where I just said I was your girlfriend?”

“*Or whatever*, you said.”

“Well I’m still adjusting to this idea, okay?”

“I’m just happy you want to try it at all, Tasha.” I bent down and shook Bridget. “Bridge. Hey, wake up honey.”

“Hm?” she asked. Her eyes went wide and she reached for the gun as she sat up.

“No, Bridget, I’m okay.”

“Oh.” She started crying. “Thank God.”

“For now, anyway. We’ll see tomorrow.”

“What time is it?”

“Late. Why don’t you go upstairs to sleep.”

“Are you sure?” Bridget asked.

“Yeah, go on.”

“Um,” She stuck the gun out toward me.

“Not yet. I don’t want that until I’m sure I’m not going to go psycho on everyone.”

“She’s going to be fine.” Tasha told her. “I promise. She’s just being extra careful because she wants to protect you.”

“I want to go back and see if Mom is home.” David mumbled. He was still half asleep. “She might be there now.”

“Maybe some day.” I told him. “Go upstairs and go to bed, David.”

“Go on up, David.” Amber told him. She gave him a little hug. “I’m staying down here.”

“No, you go upstairs, too.” Tasha told her.

“I’m not leaving Becca.”

It’s really sweet that she feels like that about me, but I can’t help her. I wish I knew what to do about this. She clearly is just crushing on me because of this hero worship thing, but it’s getting old. I’m glad I didn’t make Tasha feel like this.

“Go up to bed, Amber.” I said.

“I want to stay with you.”

“You need to go to bed.”

“I want to be with you, Becca.”

“She’s taken!” Tasha snapped at her. “Give it up.”

Amber locked eyes with me for a second, and her look went from angry that I was making her go up to bed, to angry because I didn’t choose her. I think she’s embarrassed, too. She looked over at Tasha, then back at me, and then she crawled over the back of the sofa and hurried up the stairs.

“Amber, wait!” I yelled after her.

“I could have handled that better.” Tasha said. She sighed loudly and sat on the sofa. “I’m sorry, Becca.”

“So you two are together now?” Bridget asked. “When did this happen? I’m never sleeping again, I miss too much.”

“We’re just... trying it.” I said.

“So what, I’m going to wind up alone for the rest of my life, and you have two people who want you. That’s fair.”

“Well David’s your age.” Tasha pointed out.

“Shut up, Tasha! I don’t want her getting ideas.”

“Okay, gross.” Bridget said.

“You’re thirteen. If we don’t have more available boys around for you by the time you’re seventeen we will go on a trip, okay? We’ll scour the country until my little sis finds a guy that meets her standards.”

“I’m going to remember you said that, Becca.”

“Okay, good. So go up to bed. Take that gun with you. Tasha, go up to bed. I’ll keep watch.”

“With no gun?” Tasha said. “Becca, that’s stupid.”

“I’ll be fine. If anyone shows up, I’ll scream.”

“I don’t like this.”



**Friday, April 15th**

I still feel like I could get sick. I'm scared, but it's mostly gone.  
It looks like I might be

okay. Which is great, actually. So I'm making a cake for everyone to celebrate. Believe it or not, this place has a propane stove, so it still works.

"Smells wonderful." Tasha said.

"Thank you."

"And the cake smells good, too."

"Did you sleep well?"

"I did."

"Are you, um, still sure you want to... try to be my girlfriend?"

"I'm sure."

"Good." I pulled her close and leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. "I don't think I'm going to infect you at this point."

"I like that." She kissed me quickly. "You're so much softer than the guys I've kissed."

"Guys? As in plural? I know about Mike. And Justin, from the play, I guess."

"And there was Joey and Robert."

"Oh. I didn't know. You never told me?"

"I was humiliated about Robert. I mean that was sixth grade, and he really didn't even ask, he just did it."

"And Joey?"

"That was last year, in school actually. And I was going to tell you, but I got distracted." She kissed me again. "That's the day Mom

and Dad told me we were moving away.”

“Get a room.” Amber whined. She came in and sat at the table. She’s been in a really bad mood since she found out Tasha and I were together now.

“Amber, I’m sorry.” I told her. “I feel bad for you, I do, but I can’t make myself feel something for you. I love Tasha.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Are you going to be mad at us forever?” Tasha asked.

“I’m not mad.” she growled. “I’m disappointed.” She started crying. “Maybe *I’ll* just find someone else, too.”

“Good!” I said. “Yes, go for it. That would be great. I promise you, you don’t really love me, Amber.”

“Maybe I’ll see if I can get Bridget to *give it a try*.”

“Yeah, well, good luck. She’s not even remotely interested in girls.”

“Neither was *she*.” she said, shooting a glare at Tasha.

She got up and stomped out of the room. This is going to be a real problem, I think. I wish she’d see how silly she’s being. But I can’t worry about her feelings.

“Morning.” Bridget said when she came in. “Do I smell cake?”

“Yep. It should be done soon, too.”

“Good. Whose birthday is it?”

“Mine.” I said. “I feel like I’ve gotten past being sick. Like it’s a new lease on life.”

“Lame.” she laughed. “So Tasha, if you didn’t think she was dying, would you have ever decided that you love my sister?”

“Bridget! That’s not your business.”

“No, it’s a legitimate question.” Tasha said. “Bridget, I’ve always loved your sister. As a friend. I don’t know if I ever would have decided I cared about her this way if I didn’t have to face the possibility of losing her.”

“And how long have you been in love with Tasha?” she asked me.

“This really isn’t your business, ya know?” I said.

“Come on, I’m just curious.”

“Since third grade.”

“And you’ve kept this a secret all this time? I couldn’t keep a secret two weeks, let alone seven years.”

When the cake was done, and had cooled enough, we got everyone to come in and eat some. It seemed to cheer people up. It was good too, if I do say so myself.

“Are we going to stay here a while?” David asked me. Glad to see I’m still in charge in their eyes. Sort of glad. I mean at least they’ll still listen, hopefully.

“Yeah, for a while.”

“Can I get my own room, then? I’m sick of sharing.”

We’ve been cramming everyone into the same room upstairs. It seemed safer. Plus we were all a little scared. But being on the second floor probably means none of the sick ones are sneaking in a window.

“Does everyone feel okay with splitting up now?” I asked. They all nodded. “Well, we’ve got three bedrooms. I guess David, being the only boy, should probably have his own.”

“I’ll share with you.” Amber said.

“That’s *really* not going to happen.” Tasha told her.

“Tasha and I have shared a bedroom for a long time. We’re used to it, and we’re comfortable.” I explained.

“Not to mention the fact that you want privacy while you’re doing it.” David said.

“Hey!”

“Then I want the bedroom down here.” Amber said.

“No. We’ve been trying to figure out a way to put up an alarm or something so we don’t have to have a guard every night, but I still don’t think it’s safe for anyone to stay in the downstairs bedroom.”

“This isn’t fair.”

“I’m sorry. You can share with Bridget or with David.”

“Whatever.”

Well I’m glad that went well. What is her problem? She didn’t really think I was going to share a bedroom with her, did she? Or be irresponsible enough to let her stay down here alone.

“Just put some bells on a string.” David said.

“Huh?”

“For your alarm. Stretch a string across the bottom of the stairs and put some bells on it.”

“Why wouldn’t they just unhook the string or climb under it or over it?” Bridget asked.

“Well I don’t think the sick ones are that smart.” he said.

“Yeah, but what if it’s someone who’s not sick?”

“Then either an alarm won’t do us any good or they’ll be smart enough to wait and shoot us through the window or something.”

“He’s got a point.” Tasha said.

“And we could put one of those bells up on the doors in case someone does try to come in.” Amber added.

“That’s really good, you guys.” I told them. “I think we’ll do it.”

We spent the day setting up our rooms and moving things around. We tried to do whatever we could to make the rooms our own, so David took a picture of a giant deer from the downstairs and put it up in his room, Tasha and I went with the frilliest blankets in the house and some lace curtains that were in the downstairs bedroom, Bridget and Amber dragged an extra dresser up the stairs. And we rigged our bell system. I actually think it’ll work.

For the first time in a week we were all going to try to go to sleep at the same time. It has me a little worried, but I know we can’t keep standing watch every night. It just wears us out too much.

“This is different.” Tasha said. She lifted the covers and slid up against me.

“We can drag another bed up here if you’d prefer.”

“No, this is okay. But Becca, I don’t want to do anything, ya know?”

“I know.”

“I don’t mean ever, just not now. Maybe not ever, but maybe some day.”

“Tasha, I’m not ready, either. And I don’t want to push you into anything. If you don’t want to be my girlfriend I’ll survive. I’m in love with you, but I don’t want you to feel like you have to do anything. I want you to be happy. And if being with me doesn’t make you happy then we won’t do anything.”

“You’re really insecure, you know that?” She laughed. “I’m just saying I’m not ready yet. I’m getting used to the idea of being with

you, Becca. You're like perfect for me, okay, I just want to take it slow."

I'm perfect for her. That's what she said. She's perfect for me, too. I've known it since third grade, so it's no surprise to me. The fact that she thinks I'm perfect for her is.

We laid there, holding hands, trying to get to sleep. It was so cool to just lay there with my girlfriend. But as I was drifting off I kept thinking of those women that were clearly being held as captives by the men.

"I wish I could have saved them." I mumbled.

"Who?"

"Those women a couple of days ago."

"You can't save the world, Becca."

"I feel so bad for them. I wish there were police to call. Dad would have known what to do."

"You would have put the rest of us at risk. Would you want to risk Bridget?"

"No. Not her and not you. None of you guys."

"You have done such a good job keeping us safe. Don't beat yourself up just because there are some people out there that you can't save."

"I guess. I love you, Tasha."

"I love you too."

**Sunday, April 17th**

“Becca!” I heard Bridget scream from downstairs.

I jumped out of the bed, grabbed the gun, and ran down the hall. When I reached the top of the stairs, I raised the gun and pointed it down into the living room as I started down. I stopped about halfway down.

“Dad?”

“Hi.” he said.

I dropped the gun and bounced the rest of the way down the stairs, across the room, and slammed into him, almost knocking him over. I wrapped my arms around him and sobbed as he patted my back and told me to calm down.

“Wh-where’s Mom?”

“She’s not doing too good.” He nodded over at the sofa.

“What’s wrong? Is she... infected?”

“She’s dehydrated, been vomiting and had diarrhea the past few days.”

“Hi Mr. Lang, it’s good to see you.” Tasha said. She’s at the top of the stairs, tugging her shirt down.

“I’m going to go get dressed, Dad. I’ll be right back down. Don’t go anywhere.”

“I’m not leaving you.” he promised.

I stopped to pick the gun up on my way up, then hurried up the stairs to our room. I have been sleeping in panties and a little cami, and I feel a little embarrassed that Dad saw me in just this. I slid some clothes on, ran a brush through my hair, and hurried back down.

Bridget was sitting on the edge of the sofa, talking to Mom and Dad. Mom seemed to be awake, but not really up to a lot of talking. Amber and David were sitting across the room, Tasha was standing near Dad.

“Mom.”

“Hi honey. How have you been?”

“Good. We’re all fine.”

“Becca thought she was dying.” Bridget told her.

“I got a little scrape while fighting with one of the infected ones.” I explained. “But that was a few days ago, and I haven’t gotten sick yet, so I think I’m safe.”

“Have there been many show up here?” Dad asked.

“None so far. We were in town, getting food.”

“And she sent us back to the car.” Bridget told them. “She went exploring.”

“I didn’t go exploring.” I said. Dad looks upset at me. “Dad, I didn’t. I heard voices. I couldn’t just leave people there if I didn’t have to, but I sent Bridget back to the car with Tasha so they wouldn’t be in any danger.”

“Were there people?” he asked.

“I... can...”

“It’s probably better if we explain that later on, Mr. Lang.” Tasha told him.

“Where’s everybody else?” I asked.



“We were too late.” Mom said. She closed her eyes and looked away.

“Let’s let your Mom rest.” Dad said. “Come for a walk with me, Rebecca.”

“Let me get some shoes.” Bridget said.

“I just want to talk to your sister for now, Bridget.” he told her. “Just to see how things have gone.”

We went out onto the porch and he spent a minute stretching and looking around. We walked down the road a little before he started talking.

“It’s bad out there. I guess you know.”

“Yeah, Dad, I know.”

“The only people we’ve come across that weren’t infected were just about crazy from fear.”

“I can relate.”

“But you’ve done good here, Becca.” he patted my shoulder. “You’ve kept them safe. Bridget was telling us about some of it.”

“I’ve just... tried my best.”

“I’m proud of you. Is there anything we need to discuss away from the others?”

“Like what?”

“Like what happened with the people you went to check on in the town?”

I told him the whole story. How the guys were treating the women, how I got scraped while fighting the infected on the way back, how I got out of the car and was going to go back and try to save them, and even how the others refused to let me go.

“You did what was right, coming back with them. You took care of what was most important.”

“I feel like a failure. Why would anyone treat someone else like that?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart.” He gave me a hug. “Has Bridget or any of the others given you any trouble?”

“No. Not really. Other than a little whining when I assigned rooms.”

“What did you come up with?”

“David has the first room at the top of the stairs, Bridget and Amber have the one on the east side at the back and Tash and I share the west one. It’s too dangerous to use the bottom floor. One of those things might break in a window, or maybe even someone who isn’t infected.”

“Yes. Well, what we can do there is put up some heavy shutters that we can close from the inside. We should get back and do that. I’m sure there’s some wood in the barn, or we can tear some off the barn if we have to.”

“Dad... I... I’m so sorry.”

“For what, Becca?”

“I gave up on you. I doubted you, and... I didn’t think you were coming.”

“That’s okay. You couldn’t know.”

“And... and... I shot a guy. He wasn’t even infected, but I thought they were going to try taking the car from us, and I couldn’t risk it. So I shot him in the leg.”

“I’m sure you had no choice.”

“And I almost got Bridget killed.”

“But you didn’t get her killed. She’s safe, and it’s because of you.”

“Because of luck.”

“Rebecca, when I sent you kids this way I was so worried. The rest of them were panicked. They couldn’t be trusted at all. You held it together for them. You did a great job.”

“Oh yeah, and I sort of kidnapped Amber and David.”

“I noticed that.”

“I couldn’t leave them home alone.”

“You did the right thing.”

We headed back to the cabin. He paused along the way and sat on a huge bolder that was at the edge of the road. He nodded toward another and waited until I took a seat.

“I don’t want your sister to hear this. I’m not sure I should be telling you.”

“What?”

“Your grandparents had been infected when we got there. It was hard on your mom.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Bill was fine when we got to him, but before we even left he was attacked and killed by one of the sick people. It happened right in front of us. It was pretty bad.”

“Wow. Mom was already pretty shaky. It must be hard. For you too.”

“It was. She’s going to be okay, though. I think it does her a lot of good seeing you two doing so well.”

Dad and I, along with David, spent the day putting boards up. We nailed them directly over part of the windows, but some of them we put on hinges so we’d be able to open them for light and to see

out.

Tasha, Bridget and Amber took care of Mom. They moved her into the downstairs bedroom, made her some soup, got her some Tylenol, got her something to drink. They did a good job making her feel as good as they could.

“I think the house is sealed up pretty good.” Dad told me. It was bed time already. “I don’t think you’ll be needing the bells across the stairway.”

“Okay. If you’re sure.”

“Becca, I’m here now. You can relax a little. You don’t have to worry now.”

“I hope so.” I shrugged. “I still feel responsible for them.”

“Just go on up to bed now.”

“Goodnight Daddy, I love you.”

“Goodnight.”

I went up and changed for bed, then climbed in next to Tasha. And we were talking for a few minutes, and then we started kissing. I rolled over and was sort of straddling her, bending down and kissing her. It was the most aggressive thing we’d done so far.

“Before you go to sleep I was wondering...” Dad began. I hopped off of Tasha and pulled the covers over myself. I didn’t even hear the door open. “It’ll wait.” he said. He turned around.

“Dad, wait.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s okay.”

I feel like he walked in on us having sex, except we were just kissing. Okay, we were getting kind of hot and heavy with it, but it was still just kissing.

"I wanted to know if you would be ready to do a supply run in the morning," he said. He glanced over at us, and then turned completely toward me after seeing that I was on my own side of the bed and covered now.

"Yes. Sure. We should."

"Are any of the others good enough with a gun to keep everyone safe while we go?" he asked.

"I've shown them all," I told him. "David is good, but he gets scared easily. You can trust Tasha."

"Natasha, would you stay here and make sure everyone is safe while we go?"

"I'd be happy to, Mr. Lang."

"Good then." He said. He shifted from one foot to the other, then back. "Rebecca, you've earned the right to do what you want in your life. You've done a lot of growing up in the past couple of weeks, so I'm not telling you what to do. But I'm not sure I'm comfortable with you two sleeping together."

"We were just kissing, Dad," I said. This is so embarrassing.

"Okay. Like I said, you're basically an adult now, you can make your own decisions. I had no idea it was like this between you two."

"It wasn't. It is now."

"Goodnight. Go to sleep, we need to get going early tomorrow."

"Goodnight Mr. Lang."

When he was gone, Tasha rolled over against me and threw her arm over me. She was shaking a little, but she started laughing.

“We’re going to have to get a lock for that door.”

“Oh, you say that like you think we’ll be doing something we need privacy for.”

“Maybe.” She giggled. “Some day.”

“I love you, Tasha.”

“I love you, too.”

It’s weird to be so incredibly happy in the midst of all this horror. Almost everyone on the planet is dead, but I have my family with me, and I have Tasha. I can’t believe I have Tasha. I hope she’s happy.

**Monday, April 18th**

I was up early so me and Dad could head out to gather supplies. I got up, got dressed,

headed downstairs. Bridget was sitting up on the sofa, crying. I sat next to her.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“You were right, Bridge, Mom and Dad did come.”

“Yeah.” She wiped her face. “Do you think of all the kids you went to school with?”

“Sometimes.” I put my arm around her. “You miss them. I miss my friends, too. There’s nothing we can do for them, honey.”

“Why did we survive and they didn’t?”

“Some of them may have.”

“*Some* of them.”

“We survived because Mom and Dad taught us how. And we were incredibly lucky.”

“I think we survived because of you.” She whispered. “We were so scared and would have just huddled in a corner and waited for some infected person to come along for us.”

“Dad made me do it.” I told her.

“Thanks, Becca.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Mom is really sick.” She told me. “You need to go talk to her before you and Dad leave today.”

“If she’s that sick I should let her rest.”

“No. You really have to see her. In case.”

Wow, Bridget is really scared. Mom must be bad. I suppose I should see her. Maybe we shouldn't go if she's that sick. We have enough food for a few more days.

“Morning.” I said to Mom. I went in and sat next to her.

“You ready to go?” Dad asked me.

“Yeah, whenever you are.”

“I'll give you a couple of minutes, then we should go.”

He got up and left. Mom is awake, but her eyes are darting all around and she looks really bad. She is sweating and shaking. I felt her forehead and it was hot.

“You're going to be okay, Mom.”

“Take care of your father.” she whispered.

“Me and Dad are going to go for some food in a little bit. Do you want anything?”

“Make sure your sister gets the best education you can manage.”

“There aren't any schools left, Mom.”

“It's up to you now.”

“I'll help you, but you know more...”

“I may not be here.” she said.

She started coughing and it just kept going and going, and she rolled on her side and kept coughing. After a while she rolled on to



her back and laid there, wheezing, gasping for breath.

“You’re going to be okay.” I told her again.

“I love you, Rebecca.” she mumbled.

“I love you too, Mom. You’ll be okay.”

“Do your best to be as happy as you can, honey.” she said.

“Stop talking like you’re not going to be here.”

“I may not.”

“You will.” I squeezed her hand.

“Just promise you’ll try to build a life, even with all this.”

“Okay.” I leaned my head down next to hers. “I told Tasha how I feel. At first it was a little uncomfortable, but when she thought I was dying...”

“Why would you have been dying?”

“I...” I thought we told her this last night. I know we did. “I was attacked by one of the infected people. And now Tasha and I are together.”

“Good for you, honey.” she said. She smiled.

“I have to get going, Mom. You rest and try to get better, okay? We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

I went into the living room and everyone else was in there. It was like they were waiting for me. I really couldn’t make eye contact with Bridget, because she was right. Mom is so sick. I hugged Tasha and kissed her, then Dad and I headed out.

“We need to find some medicine for Mom.” I told him. We were heading to a city about a hundred miles away.

“I wouldn’t begin to know what.” he said.

“Some Tylenol, some antibiotics?”

“Where would we find antibiotics?”

“How about in the pharmacy?”

“Great, Becca. Except how do we know which medicines are which? How would we know the dosage?”

“They write that stuff on the label and on the drug information. All we have to do is go through the orders that have been filled and not yet picked up and we can find it out. Antibiotics are really common, Dad. I mean I’ve taken them dozens of times. If we can find like cephalexin or something, it would probably work.”

“It could make her worse. She just needs rest and a lot of water.”

“She’s going to die!”

“She won’t.”

“Dad, we need to get her some antibiotics, and some kind of Gatorade or something, and something to help her sleep.”

“You’re right.” he said. “Shoot, I sure wish I knew what to do. I’m a little lost here, Rebecca.” he said. “I need your help keeping things moving. You’ve been doing a great job so far, we just all need you to continue it.”

Oh crap! Crap crap crap! I thought when they got back that Dad would just take over and I could relax and stop being so stressed all the time. And now he’s telling me he can’t handle it. I can’t do this. I can’t. This isn’t fair, he’s the parent here.

Okay, Becca, just hold it together. They need you. He’s not saying take over, he’s just saying he wants my help because he trusts me. That’s a good thing. I have to do this. They all need me to do this.

“Well we’re getting the medicine for her.” I said. “And we need to stock up on a bunch of other common medications, because we will get sick at times. Things like antibiotics, something for stomach problems, cold pills, products for us girls, and a lot of antibiotic creams and bandages for little scrapes and cuts.”

“Okay, we’ll do that.” he said.

“And Dad, we have to start figuring out what’s next. Everyone is edgy and getting more so because they spend all day sitting and wondering.”

“Yes, good, we’ll have that discussion.”

I could say almost anything and he’d go along with it. Great. That’s not good. I hate having this much responsibility. Plus what’s going to happen when we do start having serious discussions? Will he be up for that?

We drove for the better part of an hour in silence. There were infected people stumbling along the road in places, but they seemed uninterested in our car.

“So Dad, um, about me and Tasha,”

“What about it?”

“What do you think?”

“To be honest, I don’t like it.”

“Oh.” Well that sucks.

“It makes others worry about favoritism.”

“That’s stupid.”

“Is it? If that boy... what’s his name?”

“David.”

"If there was something important going on and David told you one thing and Natasha told you something else, who would you agree with?"

"Tasha, without a doubt."

"See."

"Because I know her and I trust her and David's a little kid."

"You think he's going to see it that way or do you think he's going to think you agreed with her because she's your girlfriend?"

"So I'm supposed to be miserable for the rest of my life, just in case? Are we all supposed to be alone forever, just so nobody gets their feelings hurt?"

"I didn't say that."

"I love her, and it doesn't matter what anyone thinks, I'm going to be with her. And if you have a problem with that, tough." I can't believe this. "Tasha and I can just leave if you want."

"I didn't say that. Stop getting so emotional."

"Well I'm sorry, but that happens when you start telling me I can't be with the girl I love."

Okay. Okay, could me and Tasha go off on our own and survive? Maybe. I'd rather die trying that than give her up.

"If it ends badly it's going to be bad for all of us."

"What if it doesn't end badly, Dad? What if we're just happy together? Forever."

"I've seen Natasha with boys. What are you going to do when she wants to be with a boy again?"

"But what if she doesn't? What if *I* make her happy, Dad?"

"What about when she's older and wants to have a kid?"

“Okay, you assume she wants to be a mother? And she still could.”

“I hate to have to explain basic biology to you, Rebecca, but...”

“There are other ways. We could find a guy that was willing to help with that part.”

“And you’d be happy to let her have someone else’s child?”

“What the hell is this conversation?” I stomped my foot, like a child.

“I’m just trying to figure out where everything stands. You’d be happy helping her raise someone else’s child?”

“Dad! Okay, if Bridget or I were adopted would you love us any less?”

“I wouldn’t have been happy if I had to let someone else get your mother pregnant.”

“You are getting way, way ahead of things. We just started dating.” If you can call it dating.

“I’m trying to make you think, Rebecca. You can’t play around anymore, not now. If a relationship goes bad it goes really bad for everyone.”

“Well I love her, and if she ever wants to have a child then I’ll be happy about it.”

“Good.”

“You just really can’t stand that I’m a lesbian. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“That doesn’t matter to me at all, sweetheart. It’s just if you two breakup we can’t exactly send Natasha back to her parents.”

“We already discussed this. If she decides this isn’t what she wants then we end it. Nobody gets mad.”

“Do you really believe that?”

Do I? If she broke up with me would I be able to handle it? Maybe. But if we're together for six months it's going to be even more difficult. It's kind of strange to think we have to make some kind of lifetime commitment right now or else we risk hurting everyone. But I'd do it. I'm ready for that with her. She's everything I've ever wanted or will ever want.

"Do you think Mr. and Mrs. Johnson are still alive?"

"I don't know, Becca. I hope so. I doubt it."

"Tasha thinks they are dead."

"We'll probably never know."

We stopped at the edge of town, leaving the car facing the correct direction for a quick escape. This is something I hadn't thought of before. I should have.

"I have to confess something," he said. He was glancing around, taking in our surroundings. "I don't know if I could shoot anyone, even one of those infected ones."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. The fact that you did it just impresses the hell out of me, kid. Why don't you take the lead here."

"Um... okay."

He'll shoot if he has to, right? Please tell me I'm not here alone. Please. I thought this was going to be so different. I expected him to be tough and in charge.

We went down the street and I held the gun out, ready to fire if necessary. I pointed toward a drugstore across the street and we crossed and entered.

“We need to hurry.” he said.

“Wait.” I looked toward the back of the store. “We need to check to make sure we’re clear first, Dad.”

“You look, I’ll grab.”

I walked around the back of the store, still keeping my eyes on the front also. Dad was filling a bag pretty full, but I didn’t see him get any pain killer or bandages. I went over and added those to his bag, and I added some tampons.

We took that bag back to the car, then went further into town to look for groceries. I had a backpack full of canned meat and vegetables, Dad had two huge sacks, and we were headed back out when we came across the first infected people.

We crouched down behind a car and watched them stumbling around. Did they smell us, or hear us, or what? Dad was shaking. I grabbed his arm and tugged him down an alley. We made our way down toward the car, moved two blocks, before encountering another one. Only this guy wasn’t stumbling, he was heading directly at us.

“Dad!” I shouted. He was looking at his feet, not paying attention.

He looked up and saw the guy coming. He dropped the sacks and fell on his butt as he tried to scrambled backwards. I raised the gun and took aim on the man’s head.

“Hel...”

I pulled the trigger. Shit. Damn it! Damn, damn damn! The infected ones don't talk. They moan, they grunt, they don't talk. I just killed someone. A healthy someone. Well, maybe not healthy.

"You got him. You got him, Rebecca. Good job." he said. He was at my side, patting my back.

"Daddy," I said. I broke into sobs. "He wasn't sick. I thought he was sick. I thought he was going to get you. He wasn't. He wasn't sick."

"He looked sick to me."

"He wasn't!"

"He was attacking us."

"Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he was scared and wanted help. Maybe he was trying to say help."

"We need to get moving." he told me.

I was shaking all the way back to the car. I killed a man. Please God, I was just protecting my family. At least I thought I was. Please forgive me. Please.

"Are you okay?" he asked. We were fifty miles from the town and I was still crying.

"I killed him."

"You had to."

"He wasn't sick."

"Rebecca, do you remember what I told you back home? To shoot at anyone who threatens you. You did what you had to. That guy was running at us and attacking us. Even if he didn't mean to, he was attacking us. It's not your fault."

"I should have waited."



“Until he was on top of us? What if he had been sick? If he had stopped twenty feet away and tried talking to us then you wouldn’t have shot him. You did the right thing.”

“But...”

“He could have easily killed me if you didn’t shoot him.”

That didn’t really help that much. I’m a murderer. I could justify the infected people, because they aren’t really human anymore. They just aren’t. They’re animals, and they attack and kill normal people. But that guy may have had a wife and a kid, he may have been a kind and gentle person. And I ended his life.

When we got back to the cabin I did my best to cover up how upset I was. No point in dragging everyone else down, I figured. So we gathered the bags and went into the house.

“Thank God!” Bridget shouted. She yanked the sacks from my arms and sat them on the coffee table.

“How is Mom?”

“Not good. The same.”

“I’m glad you made it back.” Tasha said. She put her arms around my neck and pulled me in for a kiss. “I was scared.” She has tears in her eyes.

“We’re fine.” I slipped from her and grabbed the sack with the medicine in it. “Make sure Mom gets this,” I handed Bridget the antibiotics. “And some Tylenol. And plenty of water.”

“Okay, I will.”

“Mr. Lang, did you get any potato chips?” David asked.

“Sorry, I don’t think so.”

“How about chocolate?” Amber asked him. “I’d kill for a Hershey’s bar right now.”

“Now that I think we can do.”

“I’m going upstairs.” I told him. I started around the sofa and Tasha grabbed my hand. I kept going, pulling away from her.

“Becca,”

“I have to lay down.” I said.

I hurried up the stairs, hoping to make it to our room before I lost it and began to sob again. I flopped onto the bed and buried my face in the pillow and let out a scream. It was just a minute later the bed moved under Tasha’s weight. She ran her hand down my back.

“It’s okay, honey.” she said.

“I killed him.”

“Who?”

I sobbed and told her what happened. She reassured me, much like Dad did. It wasn’t working. And I know she’s pretty upset, too. I can hear her sniffing. I haven’t looked up to see if she’s crying, but she had to be.

“Becca, it’s like a cop, okay? Someone bails out of a vehicle after a high speed chase and waves their hand at the cop and the cop shoots him. He has to. And sometimes it’s not a gun the guy was waving, sometimes it’s a cell phone. Does that mean the cop shouldn’t shoot?”

“It’s not the same.”

“It’s exactly the same, honey.”

Maybe she’s right. At least I know she doesn’t blame me or think I’m a murderer. I turned onto my back and I could see that she

was crying too. I thought so.

“I’m okay, Tasha.”

“I know you are. Everything is fine, Becca.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“But I’m in love with you. You aren’t in love with me.”

“I might be.” she said, smiling. “I’m trying.”

“You shouldn’t have to try, Tasha. Either you love me or you don’t.”

“No,” She leaned forward and kissed me. “I’m trying to get out of my own way, because I *think* I really am in love with you.”

Seriously? She thinks she could be in love with me. Yes! Well if one thing could cheer me up, that’s it. I love her so much.

“Tasha, do you want to have kids some day?”

“Well we haven’t gotten past second base yet, you’re a little early.” she said, giggling.

“Second base? Wait, what is that, anyway?”

“I always thought second base was like getting each other off.” she said. “Ya know, manually. Whatever.”

“What I’m trying to say is that I love you. But Dad made a point earlier. What if you want a kid?”

“Do you?”

“Honestly, with everything going on, I have no idea. I mean I like kids, but it’s crazy right now. Plus I’m only seventeen, so...”

“What is this about?” she asked, laughing. “Getting kind of

serious, aren't you, hon?"

"I am serious, Tasha. But this was Dad's idea."

"He wants us to have a kid?"

"No. He asked me what if you and I didn't work out because you wanted a kid."

"Oh." She hugged me. "I'm not there yet, Rebecca." she said. "I'm getting there. And if I have a kid some day, I can't think of anyone else I'd want to raise it with."

"Thank you."

"But Becca, I said I wanted time to make sure this is what I want."

"I know. Trust me, no pressure."

She laid next to me and snuggled up against me. She does love me. She thinks she may be *in love* with me. If this is because of all the stress of what we're going through, if this is because all the available guys are dead, it's all worth it. Okay, that's not true. But that doesn't mean I can't find one bright light in all this dreariness.

"What would our kid be like?" she asked.

"Huh? I don't know."

"We'd have to teach her all the girly stuff. It's not like she'll be able to read magazines or watch television to see any of that."

"We could still get magazines."

"But she'd have to learn how to be tough and take charge, like you."

"And how to comfort others like you do."

"You're Mom is a really good cook, so maybe she'd teach her granddaughter some of that?"

“I think she’d freak out if she had a granddaughter at this point.”

“What if we had a boy? We both suck at sports.”

“Dad could help there, maybe.” If he isn’t too angry about having a grandson from his lesbian daughter’s girlfriend.

Tuesday, May 10th

I stayed up all night. I wanted to make sure Bridget was asleep before I snuck down here.

Today is her fourteenth birthday. A special day for her. I'm not letting this messed up situation ruin it for her.

It was still dark outside when I finished frosting the cake. Tasha was with me by then. She had slept a few hours, but then come down looking for me about four A.M.

"I like the decorations." she said.

"Oh, thanks." I hung little streamers around the room.

"You're working so hard for this." She said. She came over and leaned her chin on my shoulder from behind. "This is really sweet."

"I just want Bridget to have a good birthday."

"What did you get her?" she asked. She nodded at the pile of presents on the table.

"I got her this really cute dress, and a gold necklace and earring set."

"You've put so much thought into this. I hope your mom is up to coming out for it."

"Me too."

Mom is *still* sick. She's gotten just a little better. Not a lot. I'm so worried about her, but I don't know what else to do. I've gotten books and tried to find information, but her symptoms point toward pneumonia. We've done everything we can for that. There are things she needs done that we can't really do, but we even brought an oxygen mask and tanks for her. Maybe she just needs more time.

“This is it.” Tasha said to me. She kissed my cheek.

“Careful, I don’t want to mess up her name.”

“Sorry.”

“This is what?”

“This is when I knew for sure.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That I’m completely in love with you, Rebecca Lang. No doubts now.”

I stopped and turned toward her. She’s got tears in her eyes. I started crying. I’ve wanted this so badly. And now she’s saying it. She’s sure now. No going back. No worries that she’ll change her mind. One thing she promised me weeks ago is that she wouldn’t ever tell me she was sure until she absolutely was.

“I love you so much, Tasha.”

“I love you too, angel.” She hugged me and kissed me. “But you better finish your cake. And try not to get tears on it.”

When everyone was awake we hurried Bridget in and sang happy birthday. She cried. It was so cool that it meant that much to her. We even got Mom out to eat some cake. And Bridget loved all her gifts. It was great.

In the afternoon Dad took Bridget out and showed her how to drive. She’s too young, really, but I doubt she’s going to get pulled over and asked for her license. Besides, she was really enjoying it. It was something she always wanted, and he wanted her to be happy on her birthday. We couldn’t take her to Disney World, we couldn’t go to the mall, so he did this for her.

"I know Mom would have wanted to spend some time with you today, make it special." I told Bridget. I actually went into her room and tucked her in. "She's going to get better soon, Bridget."

"I don't know if she is. Do you really think so, Becca?"

"Yes, definitely." I bent down and kissed her forehead. "Ya know, you're growing up so fast."

"Oh please."

"Before long you'll be grown up, married, moving away." I said, laughing.

"Not likely. I don't think I'm ever going to find a guy now."

"David's available. Hey Amber, your brother and my sister, what do you think?"

"He's not the only one available in our family." was Amber's reply.

"Eww." Bridget said, laughing. "Not happening. No offense."

"What is it with you Lang women? What, I'm not good enough for any of you?"

"No." Bridget told her.

"Goodnight. I love you, Bridget."

I think she may have actually hurt Amber's feelings the way she said that. That poor girl has no prospects at all. Not even a bratty little boy that may change as he gets older. At least Bridget may one day grow to like David. Amber doesn't have that.

"Hey," I stopped in front of Amber's bed and knelt down. "You're a sweet girl, Amber. Some day someone is going to be lucky to be with you."

"Just not you." she mumbled.



“I’m in love with someone else.”

“If you weren’t, would I even have a chance?”

“Um,” Would she have a chance? I don’t know her well enough to say yes, but I don’t know enough to say no, either. “Maybe when you were older.”

“Good. So I’ll just wait.”

“Don’t hold your breath, Amber.”

“Hey,” She reached out and grabbed my hand as I was standing up. “I’m glad you’re happy, Becca. Even if I can’t be.”

“Goodnight.”

I went into our room and undressed. I’m sleeping naked. That’s all there is to it. I’m a little nervous about that, but I want to be naked with my girlfriend. Maybe she’ll get naked, too. I can dream.

“I feel bad for Amber.” I said. Probably not the best way to get Tasha in the mood for anything. “I know how much it sucks to want to be with someone you can’t be with.”

“But you *are* with me.” she said. Her hand moved over and rested on my stomach. “You were talking about me, right?”

“I love you, Tasha.” I started crying hard. “It was so hard before you, but now I don’t think I could live without you. Please don’t leave me.”

“I won’t.”

“I can’t do this without you.”

“Becca,”

“I feel like I’m barely holding on anyway.”

“I’m right here.”

“I thought it would be so much better when Dad got here. I

thought he'd take over and... and... but he's just..."

"Too worried about your mom."

"No, he's just... he's not tough enough for this, Tasha. I can't believe it, but he's not. He can't make hard decisions."

"He's going through a hard time right now."

"We all are. I just want him to be my Dad. Instead he's just this guy that wanders around and doesn't know what to do."

"He loves you guys."

"I know. I love him, you know this isn't about that. He just... I just wish he'd take charge."

Thursday, May 12th

“Hey Dad, Tasha and I are going on a supply run.”

“You sure? I can go with you.”

“No, that’s okay.” I grabbed her hand. “It’ll be like a date.”

“Be careful.”

“I think we’re going to look for one of those little propane camp stoves and some bottles of propane. David was telling me about them, I think I know what to look for. If we stop using the stove so much maybe we can at least let the oven last a while longer.” The tank out back may be big, but it’s not going to last forever.

“Good idea.” he mumbled without any emotion.

I went up to our room and changed to some better shoes, put my hair in a pony tail, grabbed a backpack and the guns. I went down to Bridget’s room and knocked. I heard laughing from inside. I knocked again and she told me to come in.

“Hi.” I said, sticking my head in. Her and David were in there alone. They were sitting on opposite sides of the room, but they had really guilty looks on their faces. “What are you two up to?”

“Nothing.” she said.

“Nothing at all.” he added.

“Right. Anyway,” I held a gun out toward each of them. “I have a job for you two.”

“You’re giving *me* a gun?” Bridget asked.

“I want you two to keep an eye out while I’m gone. Dad is distracted by Mom right now.”

“Where are you going?”

“Tasha and I are going for more supplies.”

“We have plenty, Becca.”

“Well we don’t want to wait until we’re running low, do we?”

“You just want to be alone with Tasha.” David accused.

“Anyway, go downstairs and keep your eyes open. Remember to check out the back every now and then.”

“We will.” Bridget told me. She gave me a smile, happy that I trust her to guard everyone.

“And whatever you were doing in here, you’re not ready.”

“Becca,” She rolled her eyes as she nudged past me into the hall. “We weren’t doing anything. And it’s not like you should be talking. I hear you in there at night.”

“Well you haven’t heard much, then.”

When we got downstairs, Tasha and Amber were in a heated stare off. They were five feet from each other, both looking at the other like they wanted them dead.

“What’s going...” I began.

“Tasha says I can’t come...” Amber said.

“This little twerp is trying to tell me...” Tasha shouted at the same time.

“along, and I don’t see why she gets...”

“what to do, and there’s no way in hell...”

“to go and I don’t. I never get to go along...”

“that I’m sitting in a car with her for half...”

“and I’m sick and tired of sitting...”

“the day and listen to her...”

“Shut up!” I shout. I stepped between them. “Seriously?” I said to Tasha. I turned to Amber. “You can’t go today.”

“Uh!”

“I promise to take you along next time.”

“So what, she gets to go because you’re sleeping with her?”

“Okay, well A: none of your business, and B: go to hell, Amber.”

“Uh!”

“Look, I’m sorry.” I said. I clearly hurt her feelings with that last bit. “Amber, I like you, you’re a nice girl usually, but you’ve got to learn to stay out of my personal relationship. It isn’t your business. At all. Got it?”

“I want to go!”

“You’re not going.” I told her.

“But...”

“I’m in charge here.” I can’t believe I just said that. I hate the very idea.

“You’re dad is.”

“Well...” No, I am. Sadly. I wish Dad was. “I’m in charge of you, anyway.”

“This is so unfair.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. Please try to understand.”

“Why can’t I go?” she asked.

“Because I actually do want to spend a little time alone with my girlfriend, okay?”

She looked at Natasha with that burning anger for a second, and then it faded to a sadness. She looks really jealous. She glanced at me, her lip trembling, and she nodded. And then she turned and

stomped up the stairs.

I felt bad for her, but we had to get going. So we got in the car and headed away. Tasha reached over and held my hand as she drove. It was really nice.

“I wish we could go on a real date.” I told her.

“I’m sure we could find something to do. A picnic?”

“We should probably just get in and get out.”

“In and out. Sounds more like something that comes at the end of a lot of dates.” she said laughing.

I think she’s blushing. She’s talking about sex, right? Okay, well, she’s squeezing my hand so tightly it’s starting to hurt.

“Do you want to, like, um... be with me? Like... ya know, intimately” I asked. I had to look out the side window to avoid any possibility of her seeing how embarrassed I felt for asking.

“I’m a little busy driving right now.” was her reply.

“I didn’t mean now. Just... ever?”

“Sometime.” she said. She raised my hand and kissed it. “When we’re both ready.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Becca. I love you.”

“So... so you think I’m... like... sexy?”

“What?”

She started laughing and had to let go of my hand to wipe her

eyes because there were tears. I felt like crying, too, but mostly from embarrassment. I can't believe I asked that. Can I curl up and die now?

"Becca, angel, I'm in love with you."

"But... I mean... I guess what I want to know..."

"You're incredibly sexy, honey." She laughed. "Do you not know that? Seriously?"

"I... try not to think about it. It's not like I ever had anyone who I wanted to think I was sexy before now."

"Well you are. Incredibly."

"You too." I told her.

"Yeah, I know."

"Oh, wow, so confident, huh?" I asked, and I laughed.

"Well you basically glare at me all the time. I've gotten the idea you think I'm hot."

"I do. Absolutely."

"You ever feel like we're pushing our luck?"

"You mean by going out for supplies like this?"

"No. I mean us. Being together, being happy. Like we're pushing it, like God or the universe or whatever has already decided that humans don't deserve happiness."

"I don't believe that. Not at all. Maybe it's more like this is a little reward for putting up with all of this."

It does feel like a reward. But will she think I'm saying something ridiculous, or wrong? I don't think Tasha believes we're being rewarded. It's not much of a reward when you consider all the people that have died, all the people that are suffering, the changes in us and our lives, the people I've killed.

“I don’t mean to say this makes up for everything, or... or that I deserve you or anything.”

“Becca, it’s okay, I know what you meant.”

“I just mean... if I could give you up, as much as it would hurt, I’d do it if I could change things. I’d do *anything* if I could undo all of this.”

“Yeah, angel, I know.”

“Slow down a little.”

She slowed the car and we moved forward, past the fifty or sixty dead bodies that were piled at the edge of the road for some reason. She had to swerve into the other lane to miss part of them. There was... I mean... eww. One of the infected ones was... *eating* parts of the others. He didn’t even look up when we went past.

“I guess we know how they’re surviving now.” Tasha whispered.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

When we got to the edge of the city the roads were clear. We drove several blocks in before leaving the car. Several blocks away we came to a Walmart. It seemed like a good place to find the camp stove.

“I want to grab some shampoo while we’re here.” she said.

“Dad needs some shaving cream.”

“We should get something nice for everyone else. Hey, we could grab a couple of board games. Like Monopoly or something.”

“Bridget is fierce at that game. She’s cutthroat. She’ll kill us.”



“We should get something Amber likes. I feel bad for her. She can’t accept that you chose me over her.”

“It wasn’t even a choice. And even if I weren’t with you, I wouldn’t be with her.”

“She worships you, Becca. It’s hard to watch.”

“I don’t know what to do about it, though. I wish she didn’t.”

“Just have to live through it.”

“So um,” I paused and shot one of the infected people that was coming up the aisle toward us. “How long do you think these supplies in stores will last? How long will they be good?”

“I don’t know.”

I just shot that guy and didn’t even stop my conversation. What does that say about me? Am I becoming so used to this killing people that it doesn’t even faze me? I don’t want to be that person who isn’t affected by killing someone.

“We should load up with lots of chocolate.” Tasha said.

“Dad likes Mounds. Remind me to get some. Where do you think the camping stoves will be?”

“Back with the fishing stuff, I guess.”

We took that load back to the car, then went further into town to find more food. We found a big grocery store. Inside we filled bags with canned goods and headed toward the front of the store. There were at least a dozen of the infected people crammed into the space between the outer doors and the inner doors. There was green pus oozing out of their skin, leaving disgusting smears as they rubbed and shuffled against the glass.

“Now what?” Tasha asked.

“We can’t kill them all.”

“Well we can’t just stand here all day deciding!” She shouted.

“Did you see another exit?”

“No. But there has to be a fire exit somewhere.”

“Let’s find that.” One of them bumped against a door and it opened a little, but then it swung back closed. “Fast.”

We crossed the store, looking around for a fire exit. We finally found it, and ran toward it. I gripped the gun in my hand and pushed the door open. There were dozens of those things meandering around the outside of the store.

“Becca!” Tasha shouted, as one of those things bit down on my left arm. I dropped the bag I was holding and fell back against her. “Oh no. Baby, no.” she said. She shot the one who had bitten me.

“Behind...” I was saying. The one behind her clawed at her neck, leaving bloody scratches.

She spun and shot that one too, then pulled me to my feet and we ran. We had to shove several others aside, and we both wound up with more cuts and scrapes along the way. Luckily most were more of the stumbling kind, not the ones who seem stronger and more aware. We hurried through a set of doors in the back of the store, into the storage area.

“Oh shit.” I mumbled. She has deep scrapes on her neck, rips in her shirt, and I think that’s a bite mark on her arm, too. Tasha is going to die. She’s going to be one of those inhuman things. “Oh Tasha.” I said, wrapping her in my arms. I began to sob. “I shouldn’t have brought you. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry.”

“We don’t have time for this. We have to find some place safe.”

“What’s the point, Tasha? We’re going to die.”

“You don’t know that.” she said. She pulled away from me and looked into my face. “Don’t you give up on me, Becca. Now come on, we’re finding some place safe.”

We stumbled around in the dark back area. At one point we ended up in a bathroom, and Tasha grabbed a first aid kit that was hanging on the wall. And then we found some stairs leading to the roof. There was a wedge, apparently used to keep the door open, but we shoved it into the door after closing it, hoping it would make it more difficult to open from the inside.

We walked around the edge of the roof, looking down. There were hundreds of those things surrounding the building. Most were walking in random directions, bumping into each other. Did they hear the gunfire and come? The moaning sounds some were making just made me wish I were deaf.

“Let’s take care of these cuts now.” Tasha said. She sat down and opened up first aid kit.

“What’s the point? We’re going to be just like them.” My Tasha is going to die.

“Stop talking like that.”

“I don’t want to be like that, Tasha. We should just... um...” I held the gun up. “Ya know.”

“Stop being melodramatic.”

“We’re dying!”

“Well giving up isn’t helping, is it?” She opened a tube of antibiotic cream. “Sit down so I can do something with your cuts.”

“What’s the point?”

“Becca, if we do nothing we could die from infection or blood loss or something. If we at least treat the wounds...”

“We turn into one of those things.”

“Maybe not. You survived before, so maybe we will this time.”

“I... I...” I nodded. “Okay. Yeah, sure.”

I sat and watched and prayed as she cleaned and treated my wounds. It hurt like hell, but I was mentally checked out anyway. I let them get Tasha. I can't believe I was so stupid. If she gets sick I have to kill her to keep her from becoming one of them. I don't know if I can do that. And even if I do, I'm going with her. Even if I'm not sick.

“I'm so sorry, Tasha.” I said. I was cleaning her bite.

“It has to be cleaned, you can't help that.” she said, wincing as I wiped at her wound.

“Not about that. About getting you hurt. About bringing you here.”

“It's not your fault, honey.”

“If I start to... um, turn into one of those things, I want you to shoot me.”

“Becca, it's not going to happen.”

“If it does, promise me. Please.”

“I'm not making that promise.”

“Tasha,”

“No! I'm not doing it, Becca. Stop asking.”

I finished cleaning and treating her wounds. We took another trip around the edge of the building. Great, there are even more of them now.

“So we just sit here and wait to get eaten.” I said.

“We’re not going to be. We’ll figure something out. Maybe they’ll get bored and go away.”

“Maybe they’ll figure out how to get up here and get us sooner.”

“Stop being so pessimistic.”

“I’m sorry. I just... I got you killed.”

“You didn’t.”

We sat there, in the middle of the roof, sort of just staring at each other. I wonder what she’s thinking. Maybe she’s trying to decide how to keep from blaming me. She has to be figuring out that this is all my fault.

“This might be our last date.” she said softly.

“I thought you weren’t giving up?”

“I’m not. I’m just saying...” She shrugged and actually smiled. “I’m not driving right now.” she said, referring to what I asked earlier.

“So, um, we’re sitting here, surrounded by people that want to eat us, we may be dying, and you want to... I mean, like, just strip down right now and...”

“If they do kill us, or we do become infected, this could be our last chance to make love.”

“Right here on the roof?” I asked. I actually laughed.

“Gotta do something to kill time while we wait for them to leave.”

We found a relatively smooth place on the roof. A concrete slab that looked like it was designed for something huge, like an air conditioner or something, to sit on. It felt weird taking my clothes off outside.

“I don’t deserve someone as great as you.” I told her, and I kissed her neck, right next to her ear.

“I’m the lucky one. Now stop talking and start... doing.”

**Friday, May 13th**

I woke in the early hours, well before dawn, and I laid there on our clothing, still naked

and cold, staring up at the stars. At least I got to make love to her before dying. I spent a couple of hours just thinking about the things we did the night before.

“It’s beautiful.” Tasha mumbled. She was staring to the east, at the sun rising.

“You’re beautiful.”

We sat up and stared at the east, watching the sun until it was full in the sky. Just sitting there snuggling against her was one of the best moments of my life.

“We’re still alive.” she said softly.

“Yeah.”

“If we were going to get sick we would have by now, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know.” I sighed. “Probably.”

“Maybe we’re immune. Maybe that’s why we weren’t ever infected in the first place.”

“Maybe. That would be nice.” I stood and slid my shirt on. “I wonder how the crowd looks this morning.”

We walked around the building after getting dressed. Still a huge crowd. Maybe a few less, but still a lot. I wonder why they just wait there. Do they smell us, or hear us, or what?

“How do we get out of this?” she mumbled.

“Obviously we aren’t just waiting them out. And nobody knows where we’re at, so hoping for a rescue is silly.”

“So we just fight our way through? If we’re immune then we could be okay.”

“Maybe we won’t get infected, but they still can hurt us really bad, Tasha.”

“I know. I just want out of here. But whatever you want to do, angel, I’m with you.”

We walked around the building again. I was looking for some way that we could get down from here without just jumping into a pile of them. There weren’t a lot of options.

“Our best bet is over there.” I said, pointing toward a covered entryway that led into the back of the store. “We can hop down to that roof, and then to the ground. There’s only a few of them there right now, if we hurry.”

“That’s like ten foot to that roof, then ten foot to the ground.”

“I know. We can hang off the edge of the roof by our hands for the first drop, so that’ll shorten it a lot. But if we hang off for the second it’s going to put our feet down where those things could get them.”

“Do we shoot those things first, then drop?”

“Maybe. If there still is only a few there before we drop. I don’t even want to go over there until we’re ready, though. I don’t want to draw attention to that spot.”

“Let’s just do it, Becca. It’s our best chance.”

“Okay.” I leaned in and kissed her. “I love you so much, Tasha.”



“I love you.”

We went over to the place by the awning and hung off, then dropped to the awning. It sort of wobbled under our weight. It would be great if this thing collapsed with us on it, wouldn't it?

I pulled my gun out and fired at three of the infected ones below us. Tasha took out two others. And then we hung our feet over the edge and jumped down to the ground. Tasha let out a yelp and grabbed at her ankle after she landed, but she jumped up and was taking aim at the next infected immediately.

We ran past most of them, Tasha shooting two of them as we went. And then we were out on the street. There were several more of them, but they were more spaced out and we were able to hurry past.

We got to the car and jumped inside. There were four of those things right there, and they were banging against the windows as Tasha pulled away. She ran over two of them at the edge of town.

“Did you get any more wounds?” I asked.

“No. You?”

“No.” I started laughing. “I can't believe that worked!”

“It had to work.”

“Yeah.”

“Because if it didn't we wouldn't get to complete my dreams for us, angel.”

“Oh yeah? What dreams?”

“The works. Marriage, a family, our own home.”

“Typical American dream.” I said, smiling at her optimism.

“Except America doesn’t exist anymore.”

“The ideas behind it still exist, though.”

“Yeah.” She reached over and grabbed my hand. “Did you miss the part where I said we would get married?”

“I didn’t miss it.”

“So how do we accomplish this? There’s no judge or preachers or anything to do it.”

“When the time comes we’ll figure it out.” I said. I love her so much.

“What if the time is now?” she asked.

“I... I... um... huh?”

“We should just do it, Becca. Because I’m ready to be with you forever.”

“Wow. Just... wow. We’ve been together exactly one month today, Tasha.”

“Happy one month anniversary.”

“Aren’t you the one who said we should take it slow?”

“I changed my mind. We don’t have time to take it slow. The world is screwed up, Becca. I just want a commitment. Like, some sign that we’re together always and forever.”

“We don’t need to get married for that. I love you, I’m never leaving you.”

“I know. I don’t need it for me, I need it as a sign to everyone else.”

“So you’re asking me to marry you?”

“Yes.”

She wants to marry me. Amazing. Unbelievable! I don't deserve to be this happy. I just don't. It's just unreal. We'll have to have our parents sign off on it, though, for it to be legal. What the heck am I thinking, of course we don't need that. There is no law anymore. We can decide for ourselves.

"I want to wait." I said. It hurt to say it.

"What? Why?"

"Because we didn't get any rings."

"We could turn around and go back." she suggested.

"I need to figure out how to tell my parents anyway."

"One week, Becca. That's the longest I'm waiting, honey."

"Oh my gosh, we're engaged!"

"I wish my Mom were around so I could tell her." Tasha said.  
"She'd be so happy."

"Really? You think she'd be okay with this? I mean with it being me?"

"My mom loved you. She used to tell me I better never screw up our friendship or she was kicking me out and inviting you to stay with them."

"I hope they're okay somewhere."

We pulled into the drive and there was a man sitting on the porch. He looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't figure out who he looked like. We walked up the steps with the sacks in our hands, and he stared at us all the way up. He never moved to help, didn't open the door, just sat there.

"Becca!" Bridget shouted. She knocked the sack from my hand as she hugged me.

“Be careful, there’re propane bottles in there.” I said.

“You look horrible.” David said. He was looking at Tasha.

“We were attacked.” she told him.

“Where have you been, young lady?” Dad asked me.

There’s a man sitting on the sofa. Two men, actually, but one of them I recognize. One of them I saw carrying a huge gun and shoving women around.

“We were surrounded. We had to hide out on a roof over night.”

“Is that a bite?” Amber asked.

“Yeah, we got attacked by a bunch of them.”

“Are you okay?” Her eyes filled with tears. “Are you going to get sick?”

“It was yesterday. We would have been sick by now if we were going to be.” Tasha told her.

“Who’s this?” I asked Dad.

“Oh, this is Ken and Loren.” Dad said. “They were just passing by and saw us.”

“They want to stay a couple of nights.” Bridget said. She looked uneasy about it, too.

“We’re out of bedrooms.” I said, directing it toward Ken.

“I told them we could probably set them up here in the living room.” Dad said.

“We don’t have the room.” I said.

“I thought we could lay some blankets out for them. Maybe spare a couple of pillows.”

“Sorry, we just can’t do it.”

“Don’t be rude, Rebecca.”

“Dad, we aren’t letting a bunch of strangers stay here.”

“That’s not really your call there, little girl.” Ken said. He had a crooked smile on his face, but his eyes were full of hatred.

“You should let the men do the talking.” Loren added.

“It is my call, and you’re not staying here. I’m sorry. You understand, we don’t know who we can trust.”

“Robert,” Ken said, speaking to my dad. “Are you going to put up with this kind of attitude from a little girl?”

“I just don’t know.” Dad said.

“You should all leave now.” I said.

“You should mind your business.” Ken told me.

“This is my business. I’m in charge here.” Eww, I really didn’t want to say that in front of anyone, especially Dad. “You need to leave now.”

“Robert?”

“I’m sorry gentlemen.” he said. “You have a nice day.”

He got up and left the room. What, he just leaves us out here with these strange men? Nice, Dad. At least I know where this really stands now. I really am in charge. I guess I knew that. I didn’t want to humiliate him, though. It has to be tough for your little girl to take over like this, but he just is not up to it. He has proven that.

“You’re making a bad mistake.” Loren told me.

“What is your problem, Becca?” Bridget asked.

“Would you please leave now.” I said to the men.

“Your lack of hospitality is disconcerting.” Ken told me. He looks about ready to explode.

“Well I don’t beat women and keep them captive, so I guess I’m at least a little above you in how I treat people, aren’t I?”

“That’s not a very nice thing to accuse someone of.”

“Just please go.”

I glanced over and noticed that Tasha, like me, had her hand on her gun. I wish everyone else would at least get out of the way, in case I have to shoot these guys. There is absolutely no way these people are staying here. Not with my sister. She isn’t going to wind up a part of their little harem.

They slowly walked past me, glaring at me the whole way. This is bad. This is really, really bad. There’s more of them, and they have bigger guns. This won’t go well.

As soon as they were gone I sat down for a second. This can’t be happening. Okay, I just said I was in control. I’m making the decisions. Someone has to. So come on, Becca, make a decision.

“Everyone go pack what you need to take with you. You’ve got fifteen minutes.”

“What? Becca,”

“Don’t argue with me, Bridget. Those guys aren’t going to drop this, they’ll be back.”

“Well then you shouldn’t have pissed them off!”

“Those are the guys I saw! Do you want to be one of their little sex slaves, Bridget? I’m pretty sure that’s what would happen.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yes.”

“Come on, let’s hurry.” Amber told her. “David, get your ass in gear.” She paused and looked over at me. “We’ll be ready, Becca.”

“What are we doing, hon?” Tasha asked. “What’s the plan?”

“We have to load up what we can and get out. Quick.”

“But where will we go?”

“I don’t know yet.”

She’s right, where do we go? We couldn’t stay here forever anyway, because it will be bad here in the winter and I don’t think we’ll be able to keep warm with no gas and nobody capable of chopping wood. Maybe some place warmer. And if we could head to a major city we would have plenty of stores to raid. Granted, that probably means a lot of infected people around, but we sat on that roof for most of a day without problems. Maybe we could find a place that is easily defended.

“Dad, we need to go.”

“Where are you going?”

“No, we. Us. All of us. Those guys are the ones that I saw, the ones beating those women. They’re going to come back, and they have a lot of guns. We have to be gone.”

“I don’t think your mother is able to...”

“I’m not asking, I’m telling you we have to go.”

“Rebecca,”

“Dad, we’re leaving. Get things gathered. I’ll help you get Mom to the car.”

“Do you think this is a good idea?”

“Yes. We have to. We’re heading south. Some place that will be warm in the winter.”

“If you think that’s best.”

We hurried to pack the cars with as much as they would carry. Everyone looked really upset to be leaving. I think they’re blaming me. I don’t really care. Well, I care, I just can’t let it stop me from making the right decision.

“You should ride with Mom and Dad, Bridge.” I told her.

“Yeah. I guess.” She glanced over at Dad’s car. “We’re going to be okay, right?”

“We’ll be fine.”

“We made it this far, didn’t we?” Tasha said. “We’re going to be fine, Bridget.”

“Can I ride with them, Becca?” David asked me.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“I’m riding with you.” Amber told me. “It’ll be nice to have the back seat all to myself.”

Mom was not happy to have to leave. I helped her to the car, and she kept glaring at me like she thought I was being ridiculous. But she didn’t argue. I guess I really am in charge. Even Mom isn’t questioning me. I hate this.

We stopped for the night just across the border into Kansas. It wasn’t dark yet, but both Tasha and I are too exhausted to continue. We found a big garage that seemed easily protected, and we pulled the cars inside. We spread blankets on the concrete and slept that way. What sleep we got, that is.





**Saturday, May 14th**

“I can’t believe this.” Amber mumbled.

We were driving back into our neighborhood back home. Houses were still burning. Half the town was gone, burnt to the foundations. Our house was gone. We went a few blocks to Amber and David’s house. It was still there.

“I don’t know if I want to even go in.” Amber said. Her face was covered with tears.

“If you want, I can go in and check around for you.” I told her.

“What if Mom is in there? Or Dad. What if they’re... like one of those things, or even dead?”

“You just stay out here with Tasha.”

“You shouldn’t go alone.” Tasha told me. She grabbed my hand.

“I’ll be okay.”

Tasha leaned over and kissed me, and then I got out of the car. David was climbing from the back of Dad’s car.

“Stay out here, David. Go sit with your sister.”

“I want to go in.”

“Not yet. Let me check it first, okay?”

“I want to go in.”

“Please just wait a few minutes, David. Just a couple. I’ll check it real quick first.”

I held the gun up, ready to fire on anyone I might come across. The place looked exactly the same as when we left it. Even the note we left was still in the same place. I walked through, checking each room carefully. Nobody was there. It looked like nobody had been in the place at all.

“It’s clear. They haven’t been here.” I told Amber and David. “You can go in.”

“There’s no point then.” Amber said.

“Nah. Let’s just go.” David said, already turning to head back to the car with Mom and Dad.

“Hey guys, please do me a favor. Just go in and get a few things. Some stuff from your Mom and Dad.”

“What’s the point?” he asked.

“I’d feel better. Please.”

“Do we have to?”

“No. But I wish you would.”

They went inside. I made them take a gun and promise to stay together. There’s a chance I missed something, and there’s a chance someone could come in the back.

“Dad. How are you guys doing? Need a break or anything?”

“We’re doing alright.” he said. “Any idea where we’re heading?”

“We should go to south Texas.” Tasha said. She put her arm around my waist. “It doesn’t get very cold there in the winter. It might be a little hot right now, but we can deal with that if we have to. Open windows, or even get a generator to run an air conditioner or a fan or something.”

“Dad?”

“I don’t know. What do you think, Rebecca?”

I think you should step up and make a decision, Dad. Why do I get stuck doing this? I’m seventeen, I shouldn’t be in charge of everything. I’m not the parent here.

“I think Tasha is right.” I finally said.

“If you think that’s best, honey.” Dad said.

I hate this. It’s my call. If I say we should go to the moon he’d agree. I could say we should all shoot ourselves and he’d reach for his gun. This is way too much pressure. What is wrong with my parents? Have they just fallen apart completely?

Amber and David came back out and we headed away. Amber was riding with me and Tasha again, and she was crying and looking back as we drove off. I feel so bad for her.

Tasha slowed at the intersection and looked both ways. Don’t really want to get in an accident right now, I guess. But after she crossed the intersection she locked the brakes.

“What the heck?”

She was staring straight ahead, not blinking. I looked forward, but I couldn’t see anything. I looked over at her and she turned toward me, her mouth open, her eyes wide. She blinked hard.

“Tasha?”

She shoved the shifter into reverse and shoved her foot down on the gas. She backed into Dad’s car. She turned to me with that same blank look again.

“Tasha, what is going on?”

She put the car in drive again and spun the tires as she took off, turning down the road we had just passed. And that’s when I saw it. Her Mom’s car. It was sitting in front of their house. Their house that had been sitting empty, waiting for their return from the overseas tour six months from now.

“Holy crap.” I said.

She slid to a stop in front of their house and leaped from the car. I was stunned. But then I noticed that she left her gun behind. I hurried from the car, chasing after her. She was banging on the front door with one hand and pressing the doorbell with the other. Hey Tasha, the doorbell doesn’t work when the power is out, hon.

Mr. Johnson opened the door and Tasha stood there, staring up at him, for probably fifteen seconds. Then she collapsed against him, and he wrapped his arms around her.

“You’re safe.” Mr. Johnson said.

“Mr. Johnson?” I said, like a moron. “Is that really you? You’re alive?”

“Hello Rebecca. How are you? I hope your family is okay?”

“Um, yes sir.” I waved toward the car with my family in it.  
“We’re all good.”

“Natasha!” Mrs. Johnson shouted. Tasha slid from her dad and fell against her mother. “Oh honey, oh I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Hi Mrs. Johnson.” I said.

“Natasha,” her mother said. She looked up at me. “She is okay, isn’t she? She has cuts.”

“She’s okay.” I said. “Just shocked, I think.”

“Th-thought you were... de-dead!” Tasha sputtered out.

I couldn’t think of what to do. I knew we couldn’t just stand out there in the open all day, but I sure didn’t want to interrupt their reunion. Mom, Dad, and Bridget walked up beside me. Dad had a big smile on his face.

“Howard. How the heck are you?” Dad greeted him.

“It’s good to see you, Rob.” he said, extending his hand toward Dad. “Libby.” he said, nodding at Mom.

“How’d you get here?” I asked.

“Military transport. They evacuated our base when it was all over. Landed us in Charlotte. We had to find our own way here. Been back about a week.”

“What do you know about what happened?” Dad asked.

“They hit us hard. We hit them hard. Not much left, I’m afraid. Europe’s as bad as it is here. The Middle East and South Asia are a wasteland after the Russians and us threw ten thousand nuclear missiles at them. I think the only continent that wasn’t completely obliterated is Antarctica.”

“Damn.” Dad replied.

“There’s probably around a hundred million or so people left on the planet. Sounds like a lot, but half of those are going to die this

first year. We were working out the numbers, my crew at the lab and I, and we figured within five years there may be less than ten million people left.”

“Why is this happening, Dad?” Tasha managed to ask. She’s sobbing so hard she’s having a hard time breathing.

“I don’t know.” He rubbed her back. “Someone made a comment that got someone else mad, then they escalated it, then it gets escalated some more. Next thing you know we’re close to extinction.”

“We need to get inside.” I said.

They headed in, I went to Tasha’s car to get Amber and David. He had come over to sit with Amber while we were all chatting. We headed inside, where everyone was eating cookies and laughing.

It was nice to sit and listen to them talk. Tasha telling her Mom and Dad about all the stuff we’ve been through, them telling her about the horrific scenes they’ve seen.

“Becca has just been awesome.” Tasha told them. “She has kept us all safe.”

“Well, we’re very grateful, Rebecca.” Mrs. Johnson said. “We’ll take it from here.”

“It’s not safe here.” I told them. “We really shouldn’t stay here for long. We were heading south.”

“We wish you the best of luck.” Mr. Johnson said. “I think you’re all going to do just fine. Maybe one day we’ll meet up with you again.”

“We’re going with them.” Tasha said to him.

“No, Natasha, we have other plans.”

“What? No, Dad,”

“We’re expected in Wyoming. There’s a base in Cheyenne, we’ll be safe.”

“That’s great!” Natasha said. “It’ll be a little colder, but you’ll all be safe, Rebecca.” she said.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Johnson said. “They aren’t going to be allowed in. There’s a limited space. The only reason we’re getting in is because they need a biologist.”

“But...” Tasha’s face fell into a full face frown. “I can’t go without Becca.”

“I’m sorry, they just won’t allow it.”

“But Dad,”

“They aren’t my rules.”

“Well then we shouldn’t go!”

“We have to. There are a million things that could come up, and I need to be there to help sort them out. We’re talking the survival of the human race, Natasha.”

“But...” She stared over at me, her eyes raining tears. “Can we just take Becca?”

“I’m afraid not.”

They’re taking her away from me. I feel like I could just die. But at least she’ll be safe. At least I know she’ll be safe. And maybe I can get my family to a safe place in the south. And then I can just shoot myself, because I don’t know if I can live without Tasha.

“Becca?” Tasha whispered.

I got up and moved over next to her. She put her arms around me and we cried. It felt really awkward, because everyone was watching us. I pulled back from her.



“You’ll be safe.” I told her.

“I can’t go without you.” she whispered. She turned to her parents. “I love her. She has to come along or I won’t go.”

“Natasha, it’s not really open for discussion.” her father said.

“You don’t understand, I *love* her.”

“I’m sure they’ll be safe, wherever they go, Natasha.”

“No!” She slammed her fist down. “No. I’m in love with her. We’re together. As in sleeping together together. I proposed to her, we’re going to be married.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” her mother said, laughing.

“I won’t go without her.”

“You don’t have an option.” her father told her.

“Tasha,” I said. I grabbed her face and turned it toward me. “You have to go with them.”

“What? No, Becca,”

“I love you.” I gave her a quick kiss. “You’ll be safe with them. Forever. I can’t keep you safe. Not like they can.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“You’re just confused, Natasha.” her mother said. “Understandable. This has been a traumatic experience. But you will see when we get there. There will be lots of boys. Even some of the soldiers aren’t much older than you.”

“I don’t care!” She shouted. “I’m not going.”

She really loves me. Clearly. Not that I doubted that. She told everyone we’re sleeping together. But she needs to go. It’s more important that she live. And over time she’ll forget about me. She’ll fall in love with some soldier or the child of one of the other scientists. She’ll be okay without me.

“I love you so much, Tasha.” I told her. “I want you to survive.”

“Becca,”

“You should go with them.”

“I can’t.” she squeaked.

“You don’t have a choice.” her father told her.

“See, you don’t have a choice.” I said. It hurt so much to even say it.

There wasn’t much else to say. I locked down my emotions and tried hard to not show anything for the next hour. No matter how Tasha cried and sobbed and begged, I held it together.

She gave me her car. And when we pulled away from the curb, me driving her car with Amber and David riding with me, I tried very hard to think only about how to protect my family. Dad, Mom, Bridget. Except I guess Amber and David are my family, too, now. It’s my fault, I made them come along. So I guess I sort of adopted them. I’m sure Amber would be thrilled by that idea.

I think I made it ten miles before I had to pull to the side of the road. I leaned my head against the steering wheel and cried. Dad honked from behind us. Amber ran her hand down my back, trying to comfort me. She found some tissues in the glove box and held them out to me.

“I’m really sorry, Becca.” she whispered. “I know how much you love her.”

“This can’t be happening.” I said.

“We gonna sit here all night?” David asked. “It can’t be all that

safe.”

“David, shut up.” Amber told him. “We’re going to sit here as long as it takes.”

There was a knock on the window. I glanced up. Bridget. She motioned for me to roll the window down. I wiped at my eyes and rolled it down.

“Dad wants to know what the plan is.”

“I don’t know anymore.”

“We can’t just sit here, Becca.”

“Don’t you think I know that?!” I shouted.

“We’re going on as planned.” Amber told her. “She just needs a little while. Go back to your car, Bridget.”

“I’m really sorry, sis.” Bridget said. “Natasha is like a sister to me. Did she really propose to you?”

“Now’s not the best time for this.” Amber told her.

“Right. Sorry, Becca.”

I knew I had to pull myself together. There’s too many people relying on me. I leaned back and wiped my eyes, then put the car in gear and pulled away. Life sucks.

**Monday, May 16th**

We stopped on the edge of town. There were bodies. A *lot* of bodies. Thousands. Many of

them are piled right in the center of the highway. It looks like a crowd came running out of town and someone with a lot of firepower just mowed wave after wave of them down.

So does that mean this isn't a safe place? If there are this many dead here could that possibly mean that some military group swept through the city and cleared it? Are there still military people here?

"What's the call?" Dad asked.

"I don't know. There's no way we can drive through this. I guess we walk from here."

"Is that safe?" Bridget asked.

"No. But neither is just sitting here." I sighed and wiped the sweat from my forehead. "See that hotel?" I pointed to the ten story building half a mile away. "If we could barricade the lower floors we'd have all the room we need there. And it would be easy to defend. No electricity means no elevators, so we just have to block the stairway and there's no way those things could get to us. There's gotta be all kind of supplies in there, too. The only thing we'd need to go out for would be food."

"We could even plant a garden on the roof or on the balconies." Amber added.

"That's a long walk, Becca." Dad complained. "I don't know if your mother is up to that."

"Bridget and David can help with her. We have to get going."

"What about me?" Amber asked.

"I need another set of eyes and another gun in case we're

attacked.”

“Are you sure about this?” Dad asked.

“Yes. Everyone get what you can easily carry. Forget the clothes and things, just get food and weapons.”

“Got it.” Bridget said. She took off toward the car. David followed her. I think he likes her. I feel bad for them, that only leads to heartbreak.

“Dad,” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “If we’re rushed by a bunch of those things, I want you and Bridget and David to get to safety. I’ll take care of Mom.”

“I’m not leaving her.”

“We have to make sure everyone else is safe, Dad.”

“Bridget should go, but I’m staying with your mother.”

“Well hopefully it doesn’t come to that.”

That would suck. To have to let Mom die to protect the others. Apparently making these decisions is my role in life now. I’m not allowed to be happy. At all. Honestly, I don’t know what I’m going to do once we’re safely in that hotel. Do I have any use at that point? Maybe I should just walk into a crowd of those things and see if I really am immune.

We had to walk over several bodies. Do you know how bad a pile of ten thousand dead bodies rotting in the Texas summer sun can smell? There were small animals taking advantage of the easy meal. It’s so disgusting.

Amber and I walked in front, watching side streets, alleys, looking up at windows, checking for any signs of movement. I did see some infected people meandering around, but they were blocks away, and they didn’t even seem to notice us.

“I’ll go do a quick sweep of the lower floor, you all stay here.”

“Hurry.” Bridget said.

“Um,” I glanced around at everyone. All eyes were on me. “Anything happens, Amber is in charge.” Because Mom and Dad are more useless than a four year old right now.

I went into the hotel lobby. There were four dead bodies sitting in chairs, all with gunshots to the head. They look like they were relaxed, and one of them still has a gun, so I imagine he shot the other three, then himself.

There was a body that had been chewed to pieces hanging over the front desk. Flies everywhere, and the stench was awful. I checked the bathrooms, they were clear, though one toilet was clogged and the whole place smelled. The rest of the lower floor was clear also.

“You can come in.” I told them. “You’ll probably want to stay over at that side.” I said, directing them away from all the dead bodies. “Bridget and David, you keep an eye out in the front. Anything moves out there, shoot it. Amber, we’re checking the next floor. You take that stairway, I’ll take this one.”

“Got it.” she said.

“Be careful not to shoot me when we meet up on the next floor.”

I wish Tasha were here to do this instead of Amber. I trust Amber, but I trust Tasha more. I miss her so much. Gotta get over it. She’s safe. That’s what is important.

There was nobody in the stairway, and in the hallway I met up with Amber. We started opening doors. They all have the electronic key card locks, but none of them are locked. There’s a lot of luggage in these rooms. Maybe we’ll be able to find some good clothing in

them later on.

“Should we tell them, or go on checking the higher floors?” she asked me.

“If we move them up here for now it’s going to be safer than out there in the lobby. And then we can check the rest of the floors afterward. They’ll be more comfortable up here anyway. Mom can lay down.”

We helped them up to the second floor and into a room. I gave David and Bridget instructions to watch the stairs, in case someone tries to come up. Amber and I spent three hours checking the other ten floors. Turns out there are 12 floors on this building.

“Okay, Dad.” I said. “Do you think we can chain the doors to the stairs shut?”

“I don’t know. What do you think, Rebecca?”

“I have no idea, that’s why I asked you.”

“Whatever you think.”

“Dammit, Dad! I think you need to step up and help me out here.” I started crying. “I can’t do *everything*.”

“There’s nothing to hook a chain to.” David said. “There’s the door handle, but nothing on the wall for it to connect to.”

“Great. So anyone have an idea how to seal those things off?”

“We could bolt a loop onto the door frame.” Dad said. He finally woke up and decided to contribute, I guess. “We’d need a drill, and some kind of hook. You could probably find some kind of hasp at a hardware store, actually. Then you wouldn’t need the chain at all.”

“How do we use a drill with no power?” Bridget asked.

“Cordless drill.” David said.

“Well what I’m thinking is we seal up the bottom floor, and we move to the top. And then we seal the doors onto that floor, too, as a backup.”

“Where do we get a drill, or the hasps?” Bridget asked.

“I guess I’m going to go look for a hardware store.” I said.

“I’ll go along.” Amber told me. She gave me a little smile.

“I’m not putting anyone else at risk. I’ll go alone. You stay here and keep everyone safe.”

“You don’t even know what a hasp is, do you?” David asked.  
“I’ll come along.”

“No, David, she said you’re staying here.” Amber told him.

“He’s right though. I need him to come.”

“Becca, no. I’ll come. Let him stay.” she said.

“Do you know what we’ll need?” I asked her.

“No, but he can describe it. We’ll figure it out.”

“Sorry Amber, but he needs to come.”

“But,”

“I’ll take care of your brother. I promise. You just take care of my family.”

“If we hurry we could be back before dark.” David said.

We hurried away from the hotel hoping not to draw any of the infected to the hotel. It took a while to find a hardware store. And when we did, there was a couple of infected people moving around in front of it. David raised his gun on them, but I stopped him from shooting.

“The noise will just draw more of them to us.” I explained.



“Oh. Yeah, I guess.”

We waited twenty minutes until they moved away from the door enough that we could get past them without being seen. Once inside, David found the hasps right away.

“We’ll need four.” I said. “And four locks.”

“Why mess with locks? All we really need are some big sprint clips. We’re not locking anyone in, we just need something so it can’t be opened from the other side.”

“Okay, whatever. That’s fine. Let’s just hurry.”

“We have to find drills. And then pray that there are some with batteries charged up.”

We were able to find some drills with some batteries. David made sure we had spare batteries, and he even mentioned the idea of finding a car and using a power inverter to charge the batteries if we need to. He also made sure to get several extra drill bits, which is something I wouldn’t have thought to get even one of.

“Hey.” he said, pointing down an aisle as we were leaving. “We should get some of those.”

“What?”

“Crossbows. They’re silent. If we need to kill one of those things we wouldn’t make a lot of noise and draw others our way.”

“You know how to use a crossbow?”

“No, but we could figure it out.”

“I guess we could take one now and figure it out. If it works, we could get another some time.”

We got back to the hotel a little after dark. David and Amber went to install the locks. She stood guard while he did his thing. It's good he's handy with stuff like this. He's a good kid to have around. Dad is a complete waste of time right now. I wonder if it'll ever change.

It didn't take them long to install the hasps, actually. I was surprised. So we headed up to the top floor after that. I helped Dad get Mom up the stairs. She's so bad now. She hardly even talks. I don't know if she's sick or just mentally checking out on us. Kind of like Dad, only worse.

"Mom and Dad, you guys take this room." I said. It was the first we came to.

"I'll share with you, Becca." Bridget said.

I kind of zoned out there for a few seconds. I was thinking of Tasha. How we'd have our own room here, and it would be big and comfortable. We'd have a balcony, and we'd take the one clear at the other end of the hall, so we'd have some privacy. Or maybe even we'd move to a different floor. We'd have our own floor. Instead I'm here alone.

"I think you should let Becca have a room to herself." Amber told her quietly.

"Well then will you share with me again?" Bridget asked. "I don't want to be alone."

"Yeah. Let's just take this one."

"David, as soon as you get your stuff in your room, can you please try putting the hasps on the doors to the stairs?" I asked him.

"Yeah, no problem."

I went to the other end of the hall. All by myself. I prefer it this way. I hate being alone, sort of terrified of it, but the only one who really knows how terrified I am is Tasha. And she's not here to protect me from my overactive imagination. I wish I could just go to sleep and not wake up. I got my family here, they're safe. Safe-ish. The only time they will ever need to leave this place is to get food, and if they do what Amber was saying they can have a rooftop garden soon to help with that. They could probably get cages and raise chickens, too. They don't really need me now.

Friday, May 20th

“Becca.” Bridget said after knocking. “Can I come in?”

No. I guess I haven’t been much fun for the past few days. I’ve left the room three times. Once to check on all the locks to see if they would hold, twice to eat.

“Becca?” Bridget was at the end of the bed now. “Are you sick?”

“No.” I mumbled.

“David is wanting to go up to the roof and practice with the crossbow. Is that okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t you want to come?”

“No.”

“Are you okay?” She sat next to me. She really looks worried. “You look sick. You haven’t been eating.”

“I’m okay.” I grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “Go have fun.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

She leaned down and hugged me, then left me there. She looks so worried. I must look like I’ve spent a week in bed. I have. Or at least most of one. Not really a lot of point getting out of bed if I have nothing to do. Except I do have something to do.

I got up and washed up a little, ran a comb through my hair

and put it in a pony tail. I put on some fresh clothes that Amber found in some luggage two days ago and brought me. I filled a backpack with some extra ammo and a couple of cans of tuna.

“Mom.” I sat beside her. Dad is gone. Probably up with the others, learning to shoot a crossbow. That’s the most initiative he’s shown in weeks, if he is up there. “You awake?”

“Hi honey. I haven’t seen you for a few days.”

“How are you doing?”

“I’m getting better.”

“Good.” I leaned down and hugged her. “I really hope so.”

“Bridget is worried about you.”

“I know.” I scooted away from Mom and looked over at the door. “You know I love you, right?”

“Of course, honey. I love you too.”

“I’m leaving.”

“Oh? Going for more supplies? When do you think you’ll be back?”

“Um,” I took a deep breath. “I doubt I’ll ever be back.” I started crying. “I will if I can.”

“Rebecca, honey, what are you talking about?”

“I can’t do this without Tasha.” I rubbed my eyes. “I don’t even know if I want to live anymore. I just... I need her. It’s like I’ve been ripped into pieces, and I just... I just... I have to find her.”

“Of course you do.” she said. “Promise me you’ll try to be safe. Promise me you’ll come back.”

“I’ll do my best.” I said.

“Come give me a hug.”

She held her arms out and I leaned down and hugged her. She seems so fragile now. I don't know what happened to her.

"I'm sorry we couldn't do more for you, Rebecca. I wish we could have given you a better life." Mom told me.

"You guys did great. Up until this all happened there was nothing I would have changed."

"When you find her, you make sure she knows how much she means to you."

"I will. I have to go now. I love you."

I went up to the roof. Dad was standing with the others, watching David shoot the crossbow at a target they had set up. He was smiling. That's the first time I've seen a genuine smile from him since before this all started.

"Hey." I said.

"Is your mother sick?" he asked.

"No, that's not why I'm up here."

"Decided to give the crossbow a try, huh?" David said.

"Nope." I put an arm around Dad, giving him a little hug. "I got you guys here safe." I said. I feel silly taking credit for all of it, but it's mostly true. "Now I have to go."

"Go where?" Bridget asked.

"To find Tasha." Amber answered for me. "I'm surprised you waited so long."

"You can't leave." David told me.

"Sorry, I have to."

"We'll all go." Bridget said. "We'll come with you."

“No. I had to make sure you were safe. Now you’re as safe as I can get you. Now I need to go.”

“Rebecca, are you sure about this?” Dad asked.

“Yes.”

“You can’t go!” Bridget said. She wrapped her arms around me. “We still need you. Please. Becca!”

“Honey, I know you’re scared. You’re going to be okay now.”

“But what about you?”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Liar.”

“Whether I’m okay or not, I have to go.”

“You don’t have to go.”

“I do. Bridget, I hope you’ll understand this one day. But I do have to go.”

“But what about us?”

“You’re going to be okay.”

“But... well none of us are any good at figuring things out. We’re going to do something stupid and get killed. You have to be here to keep us from being stupid.”

“You don’t need me.”

“We do.”

She’s sobbing like a baby now. Please Bridget, just stop. I pulled her across the roof, away from the others, so I could talk to her. I sat down and pulled her beside me.

“You’re so amazing, Bridget. I can’t believe how much of myself I see in you, but it’s like you took all the little good things

about me and amplified them, and you're just so much better than I'll ever be."

"Stop. Just stop trying to change the subject. You're abandoning us."

"No. I would stay if I could, but I have to do this. I love you so much, but I have to go."

"Dad isn't capable of taking care of us, Becca. He's messed up, ya know?"

"He's going to get better soon. Until then I'll leave Amber in charge."

"Why her?"

"Honey, you're smart and great at almost everything you do, but you get scared. Amber's tough."

"Well what if we do something and get killed?"

"I can't baby sit you forever." I told her. It felt wrong just to say it. Like I was telling her she wasn't important. "I believe in you. You guys will be fine."

"You really have to go?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to miss you. I love you, Becca." She wiped at her eyes. "I always wanted to be more like you, so you'd be proud of me. And now you're leaving and..."

"I couldn't be more proud of you. I love you so much. There is no way I would have even made it through this if I didn't have you around. But now you have to take care of Mom and Dad. I'm relying on you. And I'll try to come back."

"When?"

"I don't know. Bridge, if I never see you again, it won't be because I didn't want to. I'm going to try my best to come back here some day."



I said my goodbyes, then Amber walked me down the stairs so she could close the bottom doors and lock it behind me.

“Good luck finding her, Becca.” Amber said. We were at the door now.

“Thanks.”

“I’m going to take care of them. I promise you.”

“I trust you.”

“Can I ask you for a favor before you go?”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“Well, look, we both know I love you, and I’m pretty sure we both know it’s a crush and not real.” She held her hand up, stopping me from interrupting. “That doesn’t change how it feels, though. Anyway, this may be my last chance. And I don’t mean with just you, I mean ever, in my whole life. So... um... will you... kiss me?” She’s so red right now. “Not just a little kiss on the cheek, but a real kiss?”

Would that be cheating on Tasha? I don’t know. I don’t think she’d think so. Especially not in this situation. And this is something I can do for Amber.

I put my bag and my gun down, and I leaned over and put my hand behind Amber’s neck and pulled her close and kissed her. I just wish it was Tasha I was kissing.

“Thank you.” she whispered.

“Amber, don’t give up. Someone out there is right for you. Or maybe even someone here. You never know about Bridget. Tasha never even looked at a girl until I told her how I felt, so maybe you two will wind up together. I would be very happy if she ended up with someone as great as you.”

“I think David would kill me.” she said, laughing.

“Maybe.”

“I already think of her like a sister, anyway. You too, I guess. When I’m honest and get past my silly crush.”

“I am honored.” I said. I gave her a quick hug. “You’re like a little sister to me, too. I love you, squirt. I hope to see you again some day.”

“I’ll pray for you.”

And with that I was out the door. It felt weird leaving and knowing I’ll probably never be back. I have no idea if I’ll even be alive this time tomorrow, so I think making it back is unlikely. I’m okay with that. If I die trying to get to Tasha, that’s okay. I’d rather die trying than to sit and always wonder.

**Saturday, May 21st**

I slept in Tasha's car last night. I only made it a few miles out of town before it started

getting dark and I decided I should try to rest. It was freaking scary to sleep alone in a car in the middle of nowhere. I mean the infected don't seem all that smart, so it's not like they would figure out how to use a rock to break the windows or something, but they're still strong and could maybe break the windows banging against them. But there were no problems.

I ran over an infected person around noon. He walked out in front of me. I didn't even try to miss him, I just slowed enough that it wouldn't hurt the car and knocked him out of the way.

Later I was stopped along the road, beside a couple of abandoned cars, siphoning gas out. I could hear a car or truck of some kind on one of the highways crossing this one about a quarter of a mile up. I stopped and watched for a while, and I never saw it pass, but whatever it was was loud. Like some big truck with bad exhaust.

What would I do if I came across a bunch of people? I couldn't really trust them, could I? Maybe. But what if they were like those guys who came to our cabin? I can't risk that, because I have to get to Tasha. If I can even find her. I know it's a military base near Cheyenne.

Thursday, May 26th

I spent the day driving around Wyoming, trying to find any signs of life, any road signs

pointing toward a military base near Cheyenne. I haven't even bothered to eat for two days now. I've made sure I had plenty to drink, at least. Except it's scary as hell stopping to pee behind a bush with all those infected people roaming around.

And then I saw it. I stopped the car and stared for maybe five minutes, crying. Signs pointing to the base. It's just a mile away. I'm here. I can't believe it, I'm here!

I rolled slowly down the road, not trusting myself to drive fast. If I died in a car wreck now it would be embarrassing. And I saw the gates. And four armed guards. I stopped the car about a hundred yards from them and got out.

"This is a military installation." A voice shouted over a loud speaker. "Civilians are not welcome. Please turn your vehicle around and leave immediately."

I stopped in the road. Okay, so what are they going to do, shoot me? At this point it doesn't matter much. I'm not leaving without her. If they'd just shoot me it would be a mercy killing. That's much preferable to the alternative.

I walked toward the gate. The warning was repeated. When I was maybe fifty yards away they all raised their guns toward me. I held my gun out to the side and dropped it, showing them I was no threat, but I kept walking.

“Stop right there!” one soldier shouted. I was about fifty feet away at that point. “We can’t allow you in. Nobody from the outside gets in, we can’t risk infection.”

“I’m not sick.” I told him.

“You have to leave. Please, don’t make me shoot you, ma’am.”

“I’m here to see Natasha Johnson.”

The four of them, three men and a woman, looked sideways at each other. I’m probably the first visitor looking for a specific person. I guess they really don’t know how to handle this.

“We’re not allowed to let you pass, ma’am.” he said.

“I need to see her.” I said. I started crying again and I walked closer. “You have to let me see her.”

“You can’t come in.” he said.

“Well bring her out here!” I shouted. “Tell her I’m here.”

“We can’t do that.”

“But I need her.” I sat on the ground and clutched my face in my hands. “I came all this way for her.”

“We can’t help you.”

“Can you give her a note?” I asked. I moved my hands away from my face and looked up at him.

“I’m afraid not. You’re going to have to leave, ma’am.”

“I can’t go. I can’t. I... I have to see her.”

“You need to leave. I have orders to shoot anyone who...”

“For Pete’s sake, Leo,” the woman said. “She’s a child. You’re not shooting her.” She started toward me, slinging her gun onto her back.

“Lieutenant Mendoza, return to your post.” the first guy, Leo apparently, ordered her.

“She’s a child.”

“She could infect the entire base.”

“She isn’t even sick.”

“We can’t let her in.”

“Well you don’t have to be so mean to her.”

She knelt beside me and put her arm around my shoulders. Her eyes ran over me checking me for wounds, probably checking me for any signs I was infected.

“Hi, I’m Janet. What’s your name?”

“Becca.” Her head tilted a little when I said that, like she was surprised by it.

“I’m really sorry, Becca, but we have very strict orders not to let anyone inside here.”

“Can you just let her know...”

“I’m afraid our C.O. would have me executed if I helped initiate contact between someone inside and someone outside. As far as he’s concerned, everyone outside that fence is the enemy.”

“I ha-have to see her.”

“I know.” she said. “Tasha and her family live in the unit just down the hall from me. She would love to see you. I wish I could help, but I can’t.”

“Please.”

“I can’t. I’m so sorry.”

“But... but... I have to see her.”

“She loves you.” she said. “She talks about you, and she cries a lot. She misses you.”

“Please, I need to see her. Isn’t there something you can do?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“But... but...” I’m never seeing her again. “Can you just tell her I was here? Just... I just want her to know I tried.”

“I can’t do that.” She sighed and sat in the dirt beside me. “This whole situation sucks.” she said. “In this world there are too few people for us to stand in the way of two people in love. But we have our orders.”

“I can’t live without her.” I said. “Just... shoot me.” I whispered. “Just get it over with.”

“Hm,” she forced out a laugh. “I’m not going to shoot you.” She gave me a little squeeze. “Tell you what, hon, sometimes when she wants to be alone, Tasha likes to sit on the roof of that building over there.” She pointed to a building maybe two hundred yards away. “She watches the sunrise some mornings. I shouldn’t even be telling you that much.”

“Just... is she safe? Is she healthy, and... she’s okay, right?”

“She’s fine. Heartbroken, but fine.”

“Thank you.”

I got up and walked the distance back to the car. So close. I’m so close to her. It’s weird, but in some ways it’s nice to be this close. In some ways it’s even worse, because she’s right there and I can’t get to her.

I sat in the car and watched the sun go down. I wonder if there’ll be soldiers here soon, making me move the car. Or maybe I can go to sleep now and never wake up. Wouldn’t that be nice?





**Friday, May 27<sup>th</sup>**

I was standing there, in the dark, staring into the compound. I can't believe I got twenty

feet from the fence and nobody has shot me or ordered me away. The fence has huge signs saying it's electrified, so I guess they know nobody is sneaking in.

As the sun came up in the east I could see a figure sitting on the roof of the building Janet pointed out. Holy crap! It's her! It's her!

"Tasha!" I shouted as loud as I could. She didn't even move. I imagine she couldn't hear me over all the activity on the base. "Tasha!" I shouted again.

I jumped around and waved my arms. And then a jeep stopped on the other side of the fence from me and a soldier got out and stared at me for a minute.

"Tasha." I shouted again, ignoring him.

"You have to leave." he shouted out at me. "You are considered a safety threat, and we will shoot you." he said.

"Tasha!"

Suddenly she stood up. I don't think she could hear me even now, but maybe she finally looked down and saw me. Anyway, she went down a ladder to the ground and I lost sight of her.

"You have to leave immediately." the soldier repeated.

“Tasha.” I shouted again.

“Becca?” I heard. It was faint, but it was her, and she was shouting my name!

“Leave.” the soldier shouted.

“Just one minute, sir.” I said. “Please, just give me one minute.”

“We have orders to shoot.” he replied.

“Please.” I said. “Tasha,” I shouted.

“Becca, don’t go.”

Suddenly she was there, right behind the jeep. Fifty feet from me. We just stared at each other for a minute. We were both crying, both smiling. Then the soldier was in front of her, ordering her away.

“Leave me alone, I want to talk to her.” Tasha told him.

“We have orders...”

“I don’t give a shit about your orders!” she shouted at him.

“Tasha, I love you.”

“I love you, Becca.”

“I’ll be forced to restrain you, ma’am.” he said to her.

“Just leave me alone!” she insisted.

“I came for you, Tasha. I need you.”

“Ma’am,”

The soldier gripped her around the waist and shoved her into the jeep. She was thrashing around, fighting him, swearing like I’ve never heard her swear.

“Get your hands off of her!” I shouted. “Don’t touch her. What kind of place is this? You’re keeping her captive, like a prisoner?”

“Don’t make me shoot you!” he said.

He got in the jeep and drove away. With Tasha. I didn’t know what to do at that point. They took her away. Will they lock her up?

I waited there for two hours, praying that she’d come back. When she didn’t, I went back around to the front gate. I don’t know, just hoping she’d come out to see me. Except there were guards telling me to leave again. So I backed away and watched from a distance. And when they kept looking at me, I went into the bushes and watched from there.

There was a shift change in the early afternoon some time. I approached them, ignoring their warning and shouts that they would shoot me. It was the same guards from last night.

“I saw her. I talked to her.” I said to Janet.

“So I’ve heard.” she said. She smiled. “I’m so glad, Becca.”

“You need to back away. We have orders...”

“I know your orders, Leo.” I said, laughing. “I’ll back off for now.”

I went back to my spot in the bushes. Okay, so if I have to I will wait until tomorrow morning and she’ll be out again. Surely they won’t lock her up completely. And if she isn’t there tomorrow, I’ll see her the next day. Or the next. Now that she knows I’m here it’s just a matter of time until I see her again. Even if we’re never together again, just talking to her through the fence means a lot.

A jeep came up to the gate and stopped. I saw Mr. And Mrs. Johnson get out, and then Tasha. I ran from the bushes, up to the gate.

“Ma’am, back away or we *will* shoot you.” I was told.

“Stuff it.” I replied. “Tasha!”

“Becca, I love you.”

She hugged her Mom and Dad, and then picked up a duffel bag and started toward the gate. Two of the guards stepped across in front of her.

“We can’t allow you outside, ma’am.” one of them said.

“Let her pass.” Mr. Johnson told them.

“Sir?” the guard said.

“Let Natasha out.”

“Sir, once she leaves she will not be allowed to return.”

“I’m aware of that.” Mr. Johnson told him.

The soldiers looked at each other for a moment, then stepped aside. Natasha turned and looked up at her Dad. They were both crying. She hugged him, then her Mom.

“Are you sure this is what you want, honey?” her mother asked.

“I love you guys.” Tasha told them. “I know you’re safe, that’s what’s important. But I have to go. Don’t you see that? I have to.”

“Rebecca, dear,” Mrs. Johnson said to me.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Johnson.” I said. “I wish this could be different.”

“Please take care of my daughter.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Well this is it, Natasha.” Mr. Johnson told her. “This is the last time we’ll see you.”

“I love you, Dad. I love you Mom.”

Tasha stepped up between the guards. Just a few more steps and she’ll never be allowed back in. Stupid rules! But she stopped and looked back. No. Don’t stay, Tasha. Wait, is this best for her? Am I what’s best for her? Would she be better off staying with them?

“Tasha, wait.” I said.

“Wait for what?”

“You have to be sure about this.”

“Angel, I am sure.”

“It’s going to be tough out here. You’re safe in there.”

“Becca, I might be safe, but I barely make it through the day. So yeah, I’m coming with you. It’s where I belong.”

“As long as you’re sure.”

She took a deep breath and took one step, then another. And then she was standing right in front of me. She dropped her bag and we grabbed onto each other, hugging, then kissing, then hugging some more.

“Ladies, I’m afraid you’ll have to go.” Leo said.

“We’re going.” I told him.

“Bye Mom, bye Dad. I’ll always love you guys.”

“We’ll miss you.” her dad said.

“I wish you could come inside, Rebecca.” Mrs. Johnson said.

“We’re going to be okay. I’ll keep her safe, I swear.”

We walked away. Everyone was crying, even Janet. And when we made it to the car Tasha and I just sat there, holding each other.

“You look like shit.” she said, laughing.

“Thanks so much.”

“You need a shower, you need to do something with your hair, and you need to eat about twenty meals.”

“Were there warm showers in there?”

“Yeah. At least there was that much.”

“I’m so sorry, baby.” I said. “To have to take you away from so much.”

“Let’s just go home, Becca. Wherever it is.”

“Are you sure you're okay?”

“Yes.” she said. She sniffled and wiped at her eyes. “Oh, hey, trade me places.”

“What?”

“It is *my* car.” she said, smiling a little. “I’m taking it back.”

“Oh.”

“Well we'll share, okay?” she told me. “But I want to drive.”

We swapped positions and she turned the car around in the middle of the road. She didn't even ask how we were getting home. Instead, she followed the signs toward Cheyenne.

"I think you'll want to turn right up..."

"I need to get something first." she told me.

"Um... what do you..."

"You'll see." She smiled over at me, then reached out and took my hand in hers.

She drove for what seemed like forever, then stopped in the parking lot of a small strip mall. I was looking around to make sure there wasn't any of those things around. It would suck to be attacked and killed now.

"Becca," she kissed my hand. "I can't wait any longer."

"Wh-what?" I looked up at her face.

"You came all this way for me." She whispered. "The whole time I was in there I couldn't think of anything but you, and then you came and rescued me."

"Um,"

"And I know I will be with you for the rest of my life now. There's nobody in the way, no reason to wait."

"Tash,"

"Come on."

She got out of the car and hurried around to me. She pulled me along, holding my hand, laughing and smiling at me. And then we were

inside a jewelry store.

“Let's see if we can find anything that we like.”

“Tasha, are...” I looked at the display of wedding rings and had to swallow the lump in my throat. “Are you sure?”

“Very.”

“But you know we can't really get married?” I asked. I reached for the case, but it was locked. I used the gun as a hammer to break the glass.

“Who says?” she asked.

When we were done selecting the most gorgeous rings I had ever seen, Tasha drove around and around until we found a church. She guided me up the steps and inside, laughing a little at my nervousness.

“I would have liked to find you a white dress,” she said. “But I don't want to wait that long.”

“It's okay.”

“Here.”

She stopped me in front of the altar. And then she started saying impromptu wedding vows, staring deeply into my eyes. I was sobbing like a baby when she put the ring on my finger. And then I repeated it back to her and placed her matching ring on her finger.

“I guess we kiss now.” I said. She leaned forward and kissed me.

“I guess we're married now.” she said.

“I guess so.” I replied. I couldn't stop smiling.

“We should, um, go find a place to, um, consummate it.”

“I'm not,” I pulled her to me and kissed her. “Doing that in a church.”





**Wednesday, June 1st**

I stared down at my ring while Tasha stopped to get a drink. We're as married as any two people can be, no matter what the laws are. I suppose if there were any such thing as a government we would have both had to have parental permission, but that doesn't matter any more.

"Ready to go, my love?" she asked.

"Yep. We should bring a gift. Something for everyone. Maybe cupcakes?"

"And where are we getting fresh cupcakes now?"

"Well they won't be fresh, but something prepackaged, or something. They're good."

"We'll worry about that later, let's just get home. It's so close."

We approached the hotel. Well, I don't see any signs of any problems. No bodies piled around it, no fresh blood. That's good.

"Freeze!" someone shouted as we entered the lobby. "Identify yourselves."

"What? Who the hell are you?" I asked.

"I'm the one asking questions here." he said. Some boy, probably around our age.

"Natasha Johnson." Tasha told him, playing along.

"Rebecca, um, Johnson." I said. Tasha smiled and grabbed my hand. "I live here."

"Right. Well since I happen to be a resident here, I think I know better than that."

“I’ve been away for a while.” I explained.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Rebecca Johnson.” Hey, I’m taking her name. That’s just all there is to it.

“Hang on.”

He lowered his gun, but kept a close eye on us. He reached around behind and pulled a walkie talkie off a clip on his belt. Walkie talkies. Why didn’t I think of that? I’m an idiot.

“We have a Natasha and Rebecca Johnson here.” he said.  
“They claim to live here. Do you know anything about that?”

“Becca?” I heard Amber’s voice say over the walkie talkie.

“Are you Becca Lang?” he asked me.

“Well, sort of. It’s not Lang anymore, but yeah.”

“Affirmative.” he said into the walkie.

“Are you serious! Let them in, Craig.”

“You can go up.” he said, waving us by.

“And who are you and when did you get here?” I asked him.

“I’m Craig. Me and my group got here about a week ago.”

“Okay. Well it’s nice to meet you.” I guess.

“Nice to meet you, Craig.” Tasha said, extending her hand.

We went past him, into the stairs. I glanced over and saw that the hasps had been added to. Now there were two more. I wonder whose idea the extra reinforcement was.

“Becca!” Amber shouted, lunging against me. We were on the landing at the fifth floor. “I’m so glad you’re back.” She let go of me and hugged Tasha. “And you too.”

“It’s nice to see you again, Amber.” Tasha said.

“Did Craig say Rebecca Johnson?” Amber asked.

“Um,” I held my hand up and wiggled my fingers, showing off my ring. “We said our vows. We’re married in our hearts, even if we don’t have a piece of paper saying so.”

“Wow. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. I want to see everyone.”

“There’s a lot more everyone to see now.” she said.

“How many?”

“Um,” She stopped and counted on her fingers. “Fourteen. They were no threat, I made sure.”

“How’d you make sure?”

“Well there’s an eighty year old woman, the boy you met, Craig, four teenage girls, Craig’s Mom, and seven children under the age of ten.”

“Oh my gosh, you’ve all been busy.”

“You have no idea. We’ve had to bring a lot more supplies. And so we’d have plenty of room to stretch out, we decided to build up the bottom door and then use all the floors. So the tenth floor is just a play area for the kids, now. We all take turns keeping an eye on them.”

“Good.”

When we passed the tenth floor I could hear a bunch of kids screaming. I smiled. Life is going on. This is good. There is a next generation.

“Dad.” I said. I was standing in the entry to Mom and Dad’s room.

“Rebecca!” Mom shouted. She got out of bed and hurried over to me. “Oh, and Natasha. Oh, I’m so happy to see you two!”

“It’s good to see you back.” Dad said.

We spent about twenty minutes talking to them. Dad cried. Both of them kept looking at my hand, at my ring. And when I told them I was now going by Rebecca Johnson they both smiled and welcomed Tasha to the family.

“Oh, oh!” Bridget shouted. I turned toward her just as she ran into me, her arms outstretched. “You’re back.”

“I’m back.”

“I th...o....ne..see...ga...” she blubbered through her tears.

“I’m sorry, Bridget. I didn’t understand any of that.”

“I think she said she thought she’d never see you again.” Tasha interpreted.

“Oh. I told you I’d try to make it back.”

“Don’t ever leave again!” she shouted.

David came past as Bridget was gushing. He poked his head in, smiled, waved, then went on his way. I’m glad he isn’t making a big deal of this.

“Come on, I’ll introduce you to everyone.” Bridget said.

“Bridge, I’m tired.”

“Come on.”

I followed her down to the tenth floor. She yelled for everyone to come into the hall. A bunch of little kids and several women and girls appeared.

“Everyone, this is my sister, Becca, and her girlfriend Tasha.”

“Bridge,” I said. She turned to me, I pointed at my ring. “Tasha is actually your sister in law now.”

“Oh cool! Anyway, this is Mrs. Banfield.” Bridget said, pointing to the old lady.

“How are you?” she said.

“This is Caroline,” she pointed to the middle aged woman. “Craig and Elena’s mother. Oh, this is Elena.” she pointed to the girl next to Caroline. “Oh, they’re from California. Craig is seventeen, Elena is fifteen. This is Sara, fifteen and from North Carolina, Mena, fourteen and from Florida, and Taylor, fourteen and from... Michigan?” Taylor nodded. “Yeah, Michigan.”

“Hi everyone, it’s nice to meet you.” Tasha said.

“These are Joey and Eddie, nine years old. Twins, obviously. They’re from Arizona.”

“Hi.” one of them, Joey I think, said.

“This one is Austin, which happens to be where he’s from. How old are you?”

“Seven.” he said.

“This little cutey is Chanel. She’s six and from Wichita.”

“I’m Leon.” A little boy said. “I’m five.”

“And he’s from Washington D.C., as far as we can tell.” Caroline said.

“And this is Cherry, we think she’s four, and she’s from California. And then there’s Ann, nine, from Missouri.”

“Wow. So, where are all of you staying?” I asked. “I mean what rooms?”

“Well we’re still putting everyone on the twelfth floor.” Bridget said.

So Craig is sharing a room with David now. Elena and her mother have a room. Mrs. Banfield has a room. Sara and Taylor share a room, Mena shares with Ann. Joey and Eddie share a room with Austin and Leon. I’m not sure how four little boys in one room works, but whatever. If I understand correctly, Cherry and Chanel sort of wind up in a different room each night. Some nights with Caroline and her family, some nights in with Bridget and Amber, some nights in with Sara and Taylor. They’re supposed to be in with Mena and Ann, but nobody is forcing it.

“So have you figured out school yet?” I asked. A bunch of the little ones groaned in displeasure.

“Not yet.” Caroline replied.

“We should set one floor up as classrooms.” Tasha said. “We could figure out what each of us teach them. I mean I’m willing to help out, and I’m sure Becca would. Some of you older girls would probably help too, right?” They nodded. “Of course you all still have some stuff you need to learn, too.”

“Yeah, ‘cause we graduated.” I mumbled.

“I think that’s a great idea, dear.” Mrs. Banfield said. “I’m sure we could get some text books from a nearby school.”

I was so exhausted. After meeting with everyone, Tasha and I went to the roof to relax and eat something. Mena showed up after a while.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” she asked.

“No. Come, sit down.”

“Bridget is so happy to have you back. She worships you, ya know.”

“It’s a little sister thing.”

“Everyone here worships you. Apparently you saved them all single handed.”

“That’s my girl.” Tasha said, grabbing my hand.

“They’re exaggerating. I mostly just kept them focused.”

“Maybe. So look, I’m not trying to put down your sister, but Bridget keeps telling me I should give Amber a chance, that Amber likes me, that I just have to make the first move.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. And the thing is, I’m not even remotely interested in girls. Not that there’s anything wrong with that!” She looks embarrassed.

“Relax, Mena.” Tasha said. “We understand.”

“Well Bridget said *you* would understand.” she said to Tasha. “She keeps telling me you weren’t either, but you gave Becca a chance and I should give Amber a chance.”

“Don’t let her bother you.” I said.

“I just think she’s trying to get me out of the way. Like, because she likes Craig.”

“Oh, and you do too, right?” I asked. She nodded. “I can’t really get involved, Mena. It wouldn’t be fair for me to step into that. Craig is free to go out with any of you he likes. But I will talk to Bridget and tell her to stop pestering you about Amber.”

“Thanks.”

“So what’s the story with this group?” Tasha asked. “How’d you all wind up together?”

“I was wandering around, looking for more people, and Caroline and her group found me. I guess the rest were probably the same.”



“The little kids too?”

“I don’t know how they survived. The little ones cry a lot. They miss their families, and they don’t seem to like any of us all that well right now. I tried to take care of them, but they don’t listen. I’m not forcing them to stay in my room. I have enough problems of my own.”

Tash and I went to bed early. We were exhausted. My room at the end was still waiting for me, so we went to that and went to sleep just after dark. I feel safe here.

**Thursday, June 2nd**

We were awakened by a kid screaming my name through the door. I hurried over and opened it, finding Chanel staring up at me. She was smiling. I bent down to her level.

“Good morning.” she said.

“Morning.” I said, trying to be pleasant. “Help you with something?”

“Miss Caroline wants help setting up the school rooms today.”

“Okay. Tell her we’ll be right out, okay.”

“Okay.” she smiled and laughed. “Your hair is a mess.”

“Yeah.” I reached out and ruffled her hair. “So is yours now.”

She ran down the hall, laughing. How cute. Tasha and I dressed and found Caroline on the fifth floor. This is where they want to have the school.

“Oh you’re here.” Caroline said. “Good. We’re thinking we can set this room up as a science class, the next one for music. Art can be in the room after that. Then we can send the little ones into a room for all the rest of their classes, and the older children in a separate one for the rest of their classes. What do you think?”

“That sounds good.” Tasha said. “And we can always expand if we need to.”

“I was wondering what you thought about going for some text books today? Amber said you would have to make the call.”

“Oh.” So I’m back to being in charge. Yay. “Sure, we’ll go after lunch.”

“Can I go?” Chanel asked. “I’ll be good, I promise.”

“Oh, I’m sorry honey, I think it’s safer if you stay here.” I told her. “But when we get back you can help put the books in the right classes.”

“Okay.” She looks really disappointed. “Can you bring some candy back?”

“Sure.” Tasha said. “Cupcakes.”

“Yay!” She shouted, and she hugged Tasha’s legs.

We headed out in search of a school. It wasn’t hard to find, but there were three infected people in the halls when we got inside. I mean it was easy to take them down, but it wears on you having to shoot people. Those are human beings. Even if they are infected and basically inhuman now, they were real people once.

“It’s going to take more trips.” Tasha said.

“Well we don’t have to take more than a couple of books for each subject. They can share.”

“I guess. It’s still going to take several trips. We should have brought, like, a wagon or something.”

“I’m ready to go. You set?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, remember you promised Chanel cupcakes. We have to find a grocery store.”

“There was a gas station a couple of blocks east, I think. They’ll have cupcakes, I bet.”

They did have cupcakes. We filled sacks full of snacks--cupcakes and candy bars. But when we went to leave we were surrounded by at least fifty infected people.

“We seem to attract these things.” Tasha said. She carefully sat her sack and the books down and pulled her weapon up.

“There’s no way we can shoot them all, Tasha.”

“Any better plans?”

“No.” I sighed. “Why do I always have to make the plans?”

“Becca, I love you, but now isn’t the time to argue that. Okay, so fine,” she picked up the sack and looped the handles over her wrist. She gathered the books. “We pick a spot and start shooting, then just run.”

“You sure?”

“I’m open for anything else you can come up with, Angel.”

“No, let’s just do it.”

“Ready?”

“You know we’re going to get more wounds. What if we’re not as immune as we thought?”

“We stand here talking and we’ll die anyway.”

“Hang on.” I leaned over and kissed her. “Okay, let’s do this.”

She pointed to a spot, and we started shooting. We probably shot six or seven before we started running. And we had to step over the bodies that had just fallen. The sack I was carrying was torn, and most of the contents fell out. I felt the scratches on my arm, and I saw one of them biting at Tasha, but I shot it before it did much damage.

And then we were through. We ran for a couple of blocks before stopping to catch our breath. I looked at Tasha’s injuries, she looked at mine, we decided we made it through okay.

“I lost most of my snacks.” I said, showing her the sack.

“Everyone can share.”

“Do you have any idea how much I love you?”

“Well, you came all the way across the country alone looking for me, then practically got shot trying to get my attention, I think I believe you love me.”

And she left her family for me. Forever. She can never see them again. So she loves me. That’s the important thing. But I’m not sure it was right to pull her away from them. No, this is right. This *has to be* right.

We handed out snacks when we got home. The kids all took their snacks and ran off to play. All of them except Chanel. She sat down between me and Tasha and slowly chewed her cupcake. She’s so cute.

“Don’t you want to go play, Chanel?” I asked.

“No.” She looked at me, then over at Tasha. “Do I have to?”

“You don’t have to, but why don’t you want to?” Tasha asked. “Don’t you like the other kids?”

“They’re okay.” she said.

“Oh. Okay.”

“Well Chanel, when you’re done with your snack you can help us take the school books downstairs.” I told her.

We spent the rest of the day setting up rooms to be used for classes. Caroline came to Tasha and my bedroom late that evening. She brought us fresh hot cocoa.

“So who got all these lanterns?” I asked her.

“That was something Amber did just after we got here. Her and Craig went on a trip and brought back a whole bunch of these things and a huge box of batteries.”

“I haven’t been giving her enough credit.” Tasha said.

“So Rebecca,” Caroline said. She paused and stared at me for a moment. “You’re so young. It’s hard to believe how in charge you really are. It’s so evident.”

“Um... thanks.” Well this is awkward. And I don’t really feel in charge most of the time.

“Anyway, I came in here tonight so we can discuss the school setup. I was thinking we should begin with just a few classes at first, get everyone back into the swing of things. What do you think?”

“That’s probably best.”

“Can we start tomorrow?”

“Um, if you want.”

“We need to figure out who is teaching what.”

“Who do you think should be teaching?” I asked her. “What do you want to teach?”

“Actually, I’d rather not right now. I would rather help out with other things. I can watch the kids during their play time, keep them out of everyone’s hair when the older kids are in class, but I don’t really want to teach anything. And Mrs. Banfield needs my help a lot. She’s not very well.”

“Right. So... Um, Who does that leave? Elena could maybe take care of teaching some stuff to the younger kids, don’t you think?”

“Maybe her and Mena?” Caroline said. “Mena is great with kids.”

“Okay. I mean if that’s okay with them.”

“The older kids need someone else. Someone they respect.”

“I can ask my dad, I guess. Maybe he’s up to it.”

“I was hoping you two would do it.”

“I... we... I mean I’ve never taught anything.”

“Angel, you’ll be great.” Tasha said.

“But we’re barely older than them.”

“The books have everything in them, you just have to help make sense of it.” Caroline said.

“But... I mean... Tasha?”

“We can try it, honey. It might be fun. Plus there’s a lot we could still learn in the process.”

Oh great, I’m being drafted. I get to be a teacher. Woohoo, just what I always wanted. My gosh, I’m going to screw this up so badly.

“When do we start?” I asked.

“Tomorrow?” Caroline asked.

“I never thought I’d have to go to school in the middle of the summer.”

“I think it would be good to get some stability back in their lives. Don’t you?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

There was a tiny knock at the door. I went over and opened it up and there was Chanel, standing there with a huge teddy bear in her arms, staring up at me. Her eyes were wide and she looked scared.

“Hey Chanel.” I bent down. “Who you got there?”

“This is Fuzzy.”

“Well hi Fuzzy.” I said, rubbing the bear.

“Me and Fuzzy are tired.”

“Oh.” Okay. And? “Well it probably is past your bedtime, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh.” she said, nodding her head in the most adorable way.

And then she stood there, staring at me. So what’s she doing? She should go lay down. Oh. She’s looking at the bed in here now. She wants to stay with us. Yay.

“So,” I said. I stepped a little to the side. “You want to sleep in here tonight?” She nodded up at me. “Go hop in the bed over by the bathroom, okay?”

She ran in and jumped up into the bed and bounced. She was laughing then. I love her laugh. I’ve missed hearing real joy and real laughter the past few weeks.

“We’ve got a guest tonight.” I told Tasha.

“And such a cute guest, too.” she replied.

“Get lots of sleep, Chanel, you start school tomorrow.” Caroline told her. “I’ll talk to Mena and Elena before I go to sleep. I’m sure they’ll agree to it.”

“Yeah, okay. Um... I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”



**Friday, June 3rd**

We got up early and bathed Chanel and changed her into some new clothes for her first

day of school. And of course Tasha and I had to get cleaned up and looking decent, also, because after lunch we're making our debut as teachers. Yay.

"Here you go, Squirt." I said, stopping at the doorway.

Chanel went inside and sat in a chair. We've removed the beds and dragged extra tables in here for them, so there's plenty of seating. Most of the other kids are already sitting.

"Hi." Mena said. "So, um, Taylor is going to help out. Elena didn't want to do it."

"Oh. Well that's good that someone else volunteered, though." Tasha said.

"Yeah. So, um, this probably will work best if you're not standing here distracting them."

"Oh, yes, of course we'll leave." I said.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude or... I'm not telling you what to do, of course." she said, laughing nervously and blushing.

"No, Mena, that's fine. You're right, we'll go. Good luck."

"I think we're going to spend most of the day just figuring out what everyone knows and what we can start with. But thanks."

"Let us know if you need anything." Tasha told her.

Tasha and I took a turn watching the front door. The place is locked down tight enough we really don't need to, but it's probably best if we don't let a crowd of the infected gather. Even if they can't get in. It would make it hard for us to get out.

After lunch Tasha and I made our way to our classroom. I was so nervous, but Tasha was humming and smiling. She's enjoying this. That's sort of sadistic. But soon everyone was there. Mena, Taylor, Elena, Bridget, Amber, Craig and Sara.

"Okay, um, hi everyone." I said. Everyone said hello. "So what's the last thing you studied in math?"

Everyone tried to answer at once, and they were trying to talk over each other. I couldn't understand anything they said. I looked over at Tasha and she was holding her hands up, trying to shush them.

"Hey, hey, HEY!" Tasha shouted. Everyone suddenly shut up.

"Mrs. Johnson?" Mena said. I was waiting for Tasha to answer, but when I looked up she was staring at me. It's nice being called that.

"Mena?"

"In our class this morning it worked really well if we made everyone raise their hand and wait to be called on to talk."

"Yes, that's probably best." I agreed.

And that's kind of how it went the rest of the day. Craig was embarrassed because all of the fourteen year olds, Bridget, Mena and Amber, are further along in math than he is. We started with some pre-algebra, just sort of a review for everyone. It made it an easy transition into learning again. We went two hours before quitting for the day.



**Tuesday, June 28th**

Mrs. Banfield died in the night. We skipped school today to have a funeral for her.

Caroline is saying a prayer right now. We're going to take her body to the morgue and lock her in one of the metal vaults they have there. We thought of burying her, but it seemed too risky to stand out there in the open that long. It's going to be hard enough to drag her ten blocks to the hospital. The morgue is in the basement, I guess.

"Mena, will you keep an eye on Chanel while Becca and I help take Mrs. Banfield?" Tasha asked.

"Sure, no problem."

"Craig, are you ready to go?" I asked.

"Let me get a quick drink first and I will be."

Tasha, Craig, Caroline and I are taking her down there. She's not heavy, but you ever try to lug a dead body ten blocks? This way we can all take turns pushing her. It sounds kind of gross, but we have a shopping cart we're going to put her in to make it easier.

"Chanel, you be good, okay." Tasha said. She bent down and hugged Chanel.

"I will."

"What about me?" I said, holding my arms out. She ran over and hugged me. "We'll be back before bed."

Chanel has sort of moved in with us. We didn't exactly plan it, but ever since she showed up that first time she just stayed. And honestly, I don't know if I could deal with it if she went to stay in

someone else's room at this point. I worry about her. I kind of think I love that little girl.

Craig was pushing the cart, Tasha and I were walking out front with our guns at the ready. Caroline was keeping an eye on the road behind us, just in case.

"Becca, can I talk to you?" Caroline yelled out.

"Will you be okay up here by yourself?" I asked Tasha.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." She reached over and gave my hand a quick squeeze.

I dropped back beside Caroline. She was looking around, watching for any threat. Or maybe trying to figure out what to say. She looks nervous.

"I'm thinking of leaving," she said.

"What? Why?"

"It's great here, you've all got something going that is very positive. I just feel like I could do some good if I went out and found more people. More individuals who need our help. I was thinking I could bring them back here."

"Caroline, it's dangerous. Are you sure you want to do that?"

"Yes, I think so. If that's okay with you."

"It's not my call. You're free to leave any time you want."

"I know. But I think most of the people I brought will be staying behind. I'm sure Elena will come with me, and I think Sara. The rest will probably stay." She nodded ahead at Craig, but didn't say anything.

"They're all welcome to."

“God willing, we’ll be back some day. I don’t plan to stay gone forever, I just feel like there’s good I could do out there.”

“We’re going to miss you.”

“You are an amazing young woman, Rebecca. What you’ve created is an inspiration, and I want to go find others and help them get here. I think you could build a real community here.”

“When will you leave?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

When we got back to the hotel it was late. I needed a shower, badly. I just felt so nasty after handling Mrs. Banfield’s body. She was wrapped, but it still just feels icky.

“Chanel,” I said. She was playing with Cherry and Leon. “Time for bed, hon. You have school in the morning.”

“We have to go tomorrow?” Leon whined.

“I’m afraid so.” Tasha said.

“Bye Leon.” Chanel told him. She gave him a hug. She’s so sweet.

“Your moms are mean.” he said. “I don’t want to go to school tomorrow.”

“They’re not mean!” she said.

She turned and stomped out of the room in a huff. Mena was watching them, and she smiled at the little scene. I just kind of stood there, stunned. Tasha nudged me.

“Becca?”

“Did you hear that?” I whispered.

“He’s just mad about going to school, he didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No.” I said. “He called us her moms.”

“You kind of are.” Mena said. She stepped next to me. “But you’re good with her.”

“We’re moms.” I said to Tasha. She nodded and hugged me. “I never thought we’d get that.”

“Yeah, but should we talk to Chanel about that? Sort of actually adopt her, kind of? At least as much as we can.”

“You don’t think it would bother the other kids, do you?” I asked Mena.

“They kind of already think of you two as Chanel’s moms.”

I couldn’t stop smiling. I’m a mom. Or sort of. Maybe. We have to see how Chanel feels about that. Me and Tasha have a kid! Dad was worried over nothing when he was talking about Tasha maybe wanting a child some day.

“Chanel honey,” I said. I sat next to her, and I was just too choked up to continue. I was fighting back tears, but they were sneaking out anyway. I looked up at Tasha, hoping she’d say something.

“Listen, sweetie,” she said. She pulled the blanket up over Chanel. “Do you remember your mom and dad very well?” Chanel nodded and her face looked sort of sad. “You understand that they’re never coming back, don’t you sweetie?”

“I miss them.” Chanel said. A tear rolled down her cheek.

“We know you do, honey.” I said. I kissed her forehead.

“But you know sometimes when a kid doesn’t have any parents anymore, well sometimes they can be adopted and have new parents. And that doesn’t mean they have to forget their first mom and dad, it just means they get to have new people who love them and take care of them.”

“My friend Bailey was adopted.” she said.

“Sweetie, would you like it if Becca and I adopted you? We’d be your new mommies.”

“Really?” she asked. She sounded excited.

“Do you want that?” I asked her. “Because we do, honey. But if you don’t, it’s okay. We’re still going to take care of you.”

“So it’s up to you.” Tasha said. “Do you want us to be your mommies?”

“Okay.” Chanel said.

“Okay?” Tasha asked, making sure.

“Do I get to stay here forever then?”

“Always.” I told her. “We love you. Of course you can stay here. Even if you didn’t want us to be your mommies.”

“Does that mean I can stop calling you Becca and Tasha?”

“You can call us Mom.”

“Okay.”

“Goodnight Chanel. I love you.” Tasha said.

“I love you, Mom.” she replied. We all laughed a little.

“What about me?” I asked.

“I love you too, Mom.”

I'm a mom! Oh wow, I just... I remember when Dad was worried Tasha would want kids someday and I wouldn't be able to give her that. Well I guess Chanel is just our little miracle, then. *Our* child.



## Five Years Later

Dad died last night. He's been bad the past six months, since Mom passed. Bridget is pretty torn up. I've been expecting it for a long time now, though. Chanel won't stop crying.

We have collected quite a crowd here over the past few years. There are one hundred and twenty three of us now. And I'm still the one in charge. I can't seem to shake the responsibility, for some reason. I don't know, I'm getting used to it. At least I have a big say in how things go.

Caroline visits every few months. She comes back and stays for a few weeks before setting out to find more people to send back here. We're considering expanding to a second building because she has sent so many.

At least the number of infected seems to be dropping. Finally. For the longest time we would see them everywhere. And I don't know if they were drawn to us by smell or what, but we started finding large groups surrounding our hotel. It made it very difficult to get in or out, but we managed. We just had to shoot a lot of infected people. I hope God is merciful to those poor people.

Bridget is getting pretty serious with Gregory. He showed up about a year ago, I guess. Anyway, I'm sort of worried about that. He's a nice guy and all, but I'm worried Chanel is going to have a cousin before long if Bridget and Gregory are as serious as I think. In fact, I think Bridget may already be a few months pregnant. I can't exactly yell at her about it, she's old enough to decide who she sleeps with on her own. I sort of wish they would have married first.

Amber finally found someone who she likes who likes her

back. Strangely, the other girl is also named Amber. They seem happy together. And at least she's over me now. Is it wrong that I feel a little jealous? I have the greatest woman alive as my wife, but I miss being worshiped by Amber. It's weird.

So Chanel, my baby, my little girl, has a whole slew of new friends now. There are now twenty kids within a year of her age. It's crazy. We've had to add a couple of new teachers to help with all the kids, there are so many.

One of Chanel's new friends is a cute little boy named Nate. She has a crush on him. It's her first crush. She's embarrassed about it, but she talks with me and Tasha about how much she likes him. He, of course, thinks all girls are icky. Which is good. I'd prefer it if he thought that for the next ten years or so. Then Chanel and he can go on dates, as long as they're chaperoned, for maybe five years. After that, if she still likes him and he still likes her, I'll let them go out alone. Maybe.

Some days I find Tasha sitting alone at the corner of the rooftop, staring to the north. She misses them so much. One day soon we will have to take a trip back to Wyoming. Maybe things have changed, maybe they would let us in to visit. But also, maybe they haven't changed. I can't decide if it would be better for her to go, with the outside chance we could see them, or not go, so she would be spared the heartbreak if she can't see them after traveling so far.

Every day I wonder if her coming along was the right decision for her. Every day I have to remind myself that it was right, that the two of us being together is the most important thing in the world. Maybe the second most important, behind keeping our little girl safe.

## About the Author

Jennie Taylor grew up in a small rural town, always dreaming of being a writer. She enjoys listening to music, writing, painting, photography, and spending time with her lovely wife. This is her first foray into publishing her work. She hopes to continue publishing in the future; she has many novels in the works. While she's not enjoying her creative pursuits or working at her day job, she can be found watching Pokemon reruns, Project Runway, American Idol, and Korean dramas. Look for more novels coming soon!

contact Jennie at [jennietaylor.author@gmail.com](mailto:jennietaylor.author@gmail.com)